

Seizing the Opportunity:

Educating Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools

Center on Reinventing Public Education

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| ABOUT THIS REPORT

Acknowledgments

This study, commissioned and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, involved a large research team from both CRPE and NCSECS. The authors are grateful to the many teachers, parents, and administrators who took time to share their perspectives and inform our findings. We are grateful for the Gates Foundation's investment in expanding solutions for students with disabilities, but all errors or omissions are the authors' alone.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

About the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools

NCSECS is the first organization to focus solely on proactively working with states, charter authorizers, special education and charter school advocates and other stakeholders to raise awareness, improve access, create dynamic learning opportunities and address barriers that may impede charter schools' enrolling and effectively educating students with disabilities. Our work is guided by four priorities:

1. **Document & communicate vital facts** to policy makers, advocates and authorizers about the status and progress of students with disabilities in charter schools;
2. **Inform policy** at state and federal levels to address barriers and create opportunities for charter schools to enroll and provide effective instructional programs and individualized support to students with disabilities;
3. **Develop coalitions and form essential partnerships** to both protect student rights and honor the core tenets of the charter sector: choice, autonomy and accountability; and
4. **Build capacity for excellence in the field** that translates to exemplary supports and services for students with disabilities in the charter sector.

CRPE Quality Assurance Process

Independent peer review is an integral part of all CRPE research projects. Prior to publication, this document was subjected to a quality assurance process to ensure that: the problem is well formulated; the research approach is well designed and well executed; the data and assumptions are sound; the findings are useful and advance knowledge; the implications and recommendations follow logically from the findings and are explained thoroughly; the documentation is accurate, understandable, cogent, and balanced in tone; the research demonstrates understanding of related previous studies; and the research is relevant, objective, and independent. Peer review was conducted by research or policy professionals who were not members of the project team.

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Introduction

The challenge of serving students with disabilities is familiar to both practitioners and policymakers, especially when it comes to education reform. Charter schools are often viewed as institutions that fail to serve students with disabilities well, or in the same proportions as district-run schools. Sometimes this is true, but it oversimplifies reality. Some charter schools serve few students with disabilities, and others are systematically discouraged from doing so because of available resources and district partnerships. And there are charter schools that have deeply committed to serving these students well.

The grand promise of charter schools is that they will use their flexibility to provide every child with a great education that prepares them for college, career, and life. This echoes the dream of all parents when they send their children off to kindergarten. Clear-eyed research about the characteristics of these schools could help cut through much of the rhetoric that fills the vacuum of information.

This report by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) and the National Center for Special Education in Charter Schools (NCSECS) examines how some charter schools are improving outcomes for students with disabilities and what factors influence their ability to do so. It offers lessons for schools working to improve how we educate students with disabilities.

We identified charter schools serving middle and high school grades and an average or higher proportion of students with disabilities. We also identified schools with a successful record of educating students with disabilities based on standardized test outcomes, student course taking, or suspension and expulsion rates. To identify schools with both a strong record of performance and interesting approaches, we also asked leaders in the field to nominate schools for us to consider. We observed classrooms and conducted structured interviews with teachers, administrators, and parents in 30 charter schools across the country.

We found that educating students with disabilities well in these charter schools is based on an integrated set of principles that are put into action, reinforced, and sustained by intentional systems and structures. Three principles appear to matter most: **1) Trusting relationships** between schools and families built on caring and productive communication, **2) an orientation toward ongoing problem solving** to meet individual needs, and **3) blurred lines between special and general education** students' instructional and social experiences.

Why Do We Say “Blurring Lines” Instead of “Inclusion”?

For some it may seem strange that we avoid the language of inclusion when we describe academic programs that educate students with disabilities alongside their nondisabled peers.

The term inclusion is frequently misused in discussions of special education as simply the student with disability's *proximity* to students without disabilities. Are they in the same classroom with their peers without disabilities? Blurring lines refers to a concept beyond physical location toward substantive access to academic content and relationships with peers in the general education classroom.

In the schools that seemed to blur the lines most consistently, the sense of shared community expressed by students with disabilities and their parents came from more than a close proximity to their peers. It came from the shared experiences they had with their peers and the fact that differentiation in learning was the norm across these schools for all students. Inclusion models, as traditionally understood, are part of establishing and reinforcing those norms but they are not sufficient.

Without schoolwide commitment to all three principles, individual teacher and classroom practices falter.

Schools reinforce and sustain these principles with four overlapping conditions:

- Assertive leadership that prioritizes special education
- Strong cultures of mutual respect and solution seeking
- Robust data and technology that support flexible but intentional instructional approaches
- Purposeful organizational structures, resource allocation, and tools that facilitate collaboration and information sharing

These principles and the school conditions that support them are extremely difficult to establish and maintain. They require a great deal of effort and constantly renewed commitment, which is why they are rarely used and will be difficult for other schools to imitate.

External policies—including authorizers’ accountability policy, how and at what level special education is funded, and the availability of external special education support providers and professional growth opportunities for educators—can bolster schools to establish and carry out the three core principles, but they can also interfere with these efforts. Independence and small size can help charter schools build strong institutional cultures, but can also make it difficult to achieve economies of scale that allow schools to efficiently hire specialized staff.

Though it is challenging to follow the lead set by the most promising schools in our study, it is clear that even they have much work ahead to achieve excellence for all.

Overall, our research points to six important implications for schools and school systems:

Special education cannot be an isolated program. The best schools have a schoolwide commitment to serving every student’s unique needs. They seamlessly integrate students with unique learning needs into the instructional and social fabric of the school.

Special education cannot be static. Excellent educators are continuously learning and bringing new approaches to their schools. They have a hunger to do better; school leaders encourage this mindset through excellent professional development and dedicated time for collaboration.

Special education cannot be generic or standardized. Creativity and flexibility are required to adapt to individual needs—not blind adherence to set practices. More sharing of innovative and effective approaches, including technology, should be a priority across the nation’s schools.

Quality teachers and leaders are nonnegotiable. High turnover rates and underresourced schools inhibit the delivery of high-quality services to students with disabilities. Teacher recruitment must be intentionally designed to find educators who embrace the idea that all adults in the building are responsible for all students, including those with disabilities.

Balancing rigor with effective accommodation and personalization, and planning for life beyond high school are common struggles. This was true even among the most advanced schools and those known for having high expectations. While some schools have already made great progress, there is much more to do before every child can get the education they need and deserve.

Charter schools could use their flexibility in special education more effectively. Most of the approaches we observed in charter schools were fairly traditional, but in some promising schools we studied, they were delivered consistently and effectively. We discovered a few schools that operated further outside the box, to good effect—leading us to believe that charter schools could do more to innovate around staffing models or instructional approaches for improved efficiency and results. Policies, funding systems, authorizing practices, and collaborations with districts and other community organizations may be designed to better support this type of innovation.

Our findings, though exploratory, suggest a clear set of actions for schools, charter authorizers, and philanthropies. We recommend immediate steps all schools should take as well as needed investments and changes to policy. However, even if every school adopted the strategies we identified in this report, it may not be enough to close the achievement gap between students with IEPs and their peers. In the schools in our study with the strongest overall outcomes, just half of students with IEPs had achieved grade-level proficiency. It is clear new breakthroughs will be necessary to enable all students to meet their full potential.

All public schools, both charter and district, have work ahead to realize the potential of every student with unique learning needs and unique abilities. Realizing that goal will take time, money, and political will. It will also require deliberate efforts to cultivate new approaches to educating students with diverse learning needs. Charter schools, with their inherent flexibility, are logical places to launch these efforts. We at CRPE and NCSECS will continue to posit new ideas and research promising steps toward this end.

About the Study

This focused, multistate study attempts to build an evidence base about how charter schools are providing effective supports and services for students with disabilities. It is a critical step in building charter school capacity and leadership in special education.

We sought to identify high-leverage actions in charter schools that resulted in positive outcomes for students with disabilities. We considered policies and practices that are unique to the charter school context. And we examined previous research to confirm that the trends we observed are consistent with previous evidence. This was an exploratory study designed to identify hypotheses, so our findings can only suggest actions to try and test in the future. These cases are not necessarily representative of all charter schools, but they provide information-rich accounts of practices school leaders, educators, and parents see as important to the success of their own programs. Many of these practices have support in previous research documenting their effectiveness, though most of the schools and networks in our study have not been subject to a third-party impact study.

The study conducted by CRPE and NCSECS was commissioned and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. We are grateful for their investment in expanding solutions for students with disabilities, but all errors or omissions are the authors' alone. We visited 30 schools in 20 cities and towns across 14 states. We spent two days at each school and conducted semi-structured interviews with special education and general education teachers, administrators, and parents. We observed general education inclusion classrooms in every school. We selected 20 of the schools based on promising academic or behavioral outcomes. In several cases, an expert in the field also identified the school as having a particularly compelling approach to special education. We also visited 10 schools representing 5 different charter management organizations (CMOs) that have been asked by the Gates Foundation to pilot strategies based on the results of our study.

In the end, our diverse sample of 30 schools ranged in size from about 100 students to almost 1,500 students and were located in rural, small town, and urban contexts. Just over half the schools in our study opened more than 10 years ago, and a handful were new, opening within the last five years. Though this study focused on middle and high school grades, a few of the schools operated as K-12 schools.

We limited our search to schools that enrolled more than 8 percent and less than 50 percent students with disabilities. The median school in our study enrolled about 18 percent students with disabilities. (One school ended up falling below our 8 percent threshold in data that was updated after visiting the school.)

We also sought schools serving students from less affluent households and those serving a large percent of students of color. Seventy-two percent of students in our median school were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Because our study includes schools located across rural, small town, and urban locales, there is a large variation in the percent of students of color. While the median school enrolled 8 percent and 28 percent black and Hispanic students, respectively, students of color made up more than 50 percent of the student body in 23 of the 30 schools we visited.

We sought schools that appeared to outperform their predicted performance for students with disabilities, controlling for the student composition of the school.¹ Even so, proficiency rates for students with disabilities are appallingly low. Across the schools in our study, the standardized test performance and graduation rates of students with IEPs varied significantly but mirrored the performance of schools nationally. In the median school in our study, only 22 percent and 10 percent of students with disabilities scored proficient on their state assessments in English language arts and math respectively, though our study included schools where as many as half of the students with IEPs scored proficient. Nationally, for comparison, median state assessment proficiency rates for the 2016–2017 school year were 15 percent in both English and math for students with disabilities. The median school in our study graduated 70 percent of its students with IEPs in four years. Again, our study displayed a wide range: 35 percent to 90 percent of students with IEPs graduate in four years.

This study involved a large research team from both organizations. From CRPE: Michael DeArmond, Sean Gill, Betheny Gross, Georgia Heyward, Robin Lake, Lanya McKittrick, Alice Opalka, Travis Pillow, Roohi Sharma, and Sivan Tuchman. From NCSECS: Lauren Morando Rhim, Stephanie Lancet, and Shaini Kothari.

The authors are grateful to the many teachers, parents, and administrators who took time to share their perspectives and inform our findings.

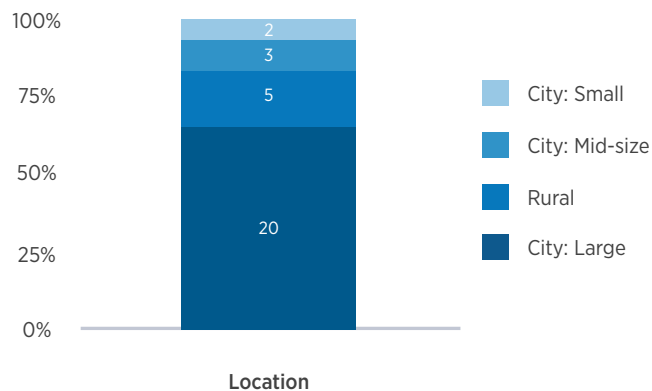
A more detailed explanation of our sampling method and case study approach is included in the Appendix A.

Demographic Profile of Sample Schools

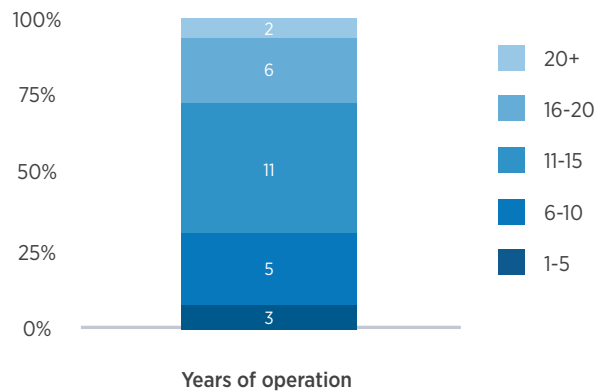
	Average	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Enrollment	528	394	104	1479
% Students with disabilities	20.60%	18.30%	6.50%	49.00%
% Free or reduced-price lunch	71.32%	72.1%	0.0%	100.0%
% Black	29.83%	8.4%	0.0%	99.3%
% Hispanic	38.19%	27.8%	0.4%	100.0%
% White	25.83%	5.7%	0.0%	95.4%

Source: National data are as reported in the 2017-18 Federal Common Core of Data from the National Center on Education Statistics.

Location of Our Sample

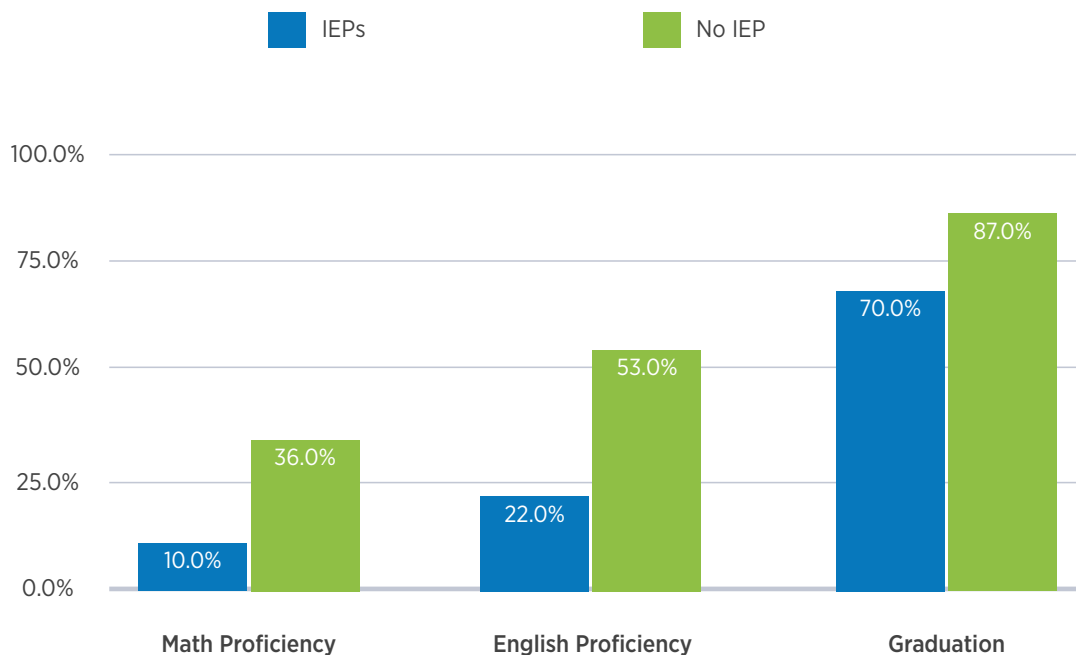


Sample Schools: Years of Operation



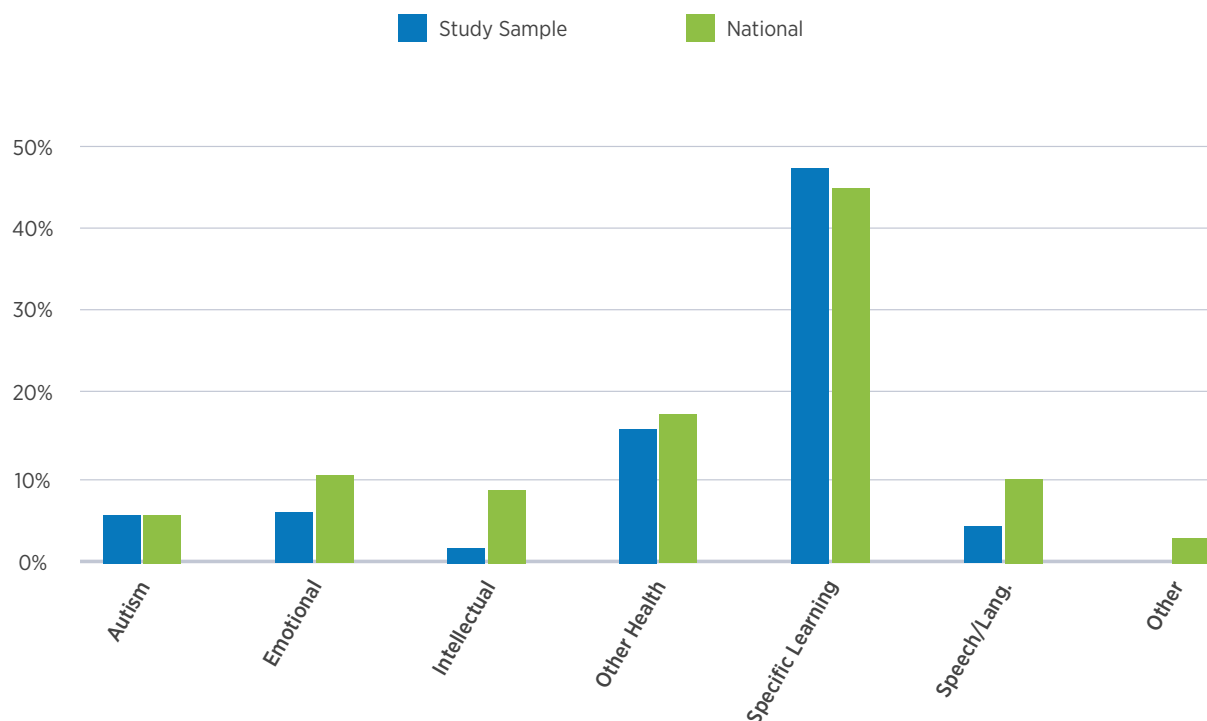
Source: As reported by the sample schools for the 2018-19 school year.

English and Math Proficiency Rates for Students With and Without IEPs in Our Sample, 2015-16



Source: EdFacts Data Files, 2016-2017

Disability Types in Sample Schools Compared to Nation



Source: National Data are as reported in the 2017-18 Federal Common Core of Data from the National Center on Education Statistics. Data from our sample are as reported by the schools for the 2018-19 school year.

A Note about Naming Schools in This Report

We promised schools that participated in the study that we would keep their interviews and observations confidential. Throughout the report we largely refer to sources with abstract references such as “teachers reported to us...” On occasion, we share the school name. In each of these cases, we have written a separate profile of practice highlighting some aspect of this school’s approach to educating students with disabilities. We received explicit permission from the school to share its name when discussing that aspect of the school.

Principles, Systems, and Contexts: A Framework of Special Education in Charter Schools

Schools across our study anchored their approach to special education with three integrated principles: 1) **Trusting relationships between schools and families** built on caring and productive communication, 2) an orientation toward **ongoing problem solving** to meet individual needs, and 3) **blurred lines between special and general education** students' instructional and social experiences. Schools committed themselves to living all three of these principles.

Schools intentionally reinforced and sustained these principles with internal systems and structures. External policy and contexts—though never used as an excuse for failure by the schools in our study—both support and interfere with these efforts. Even the most promising schools had more work ahead to achieve excellence for all.

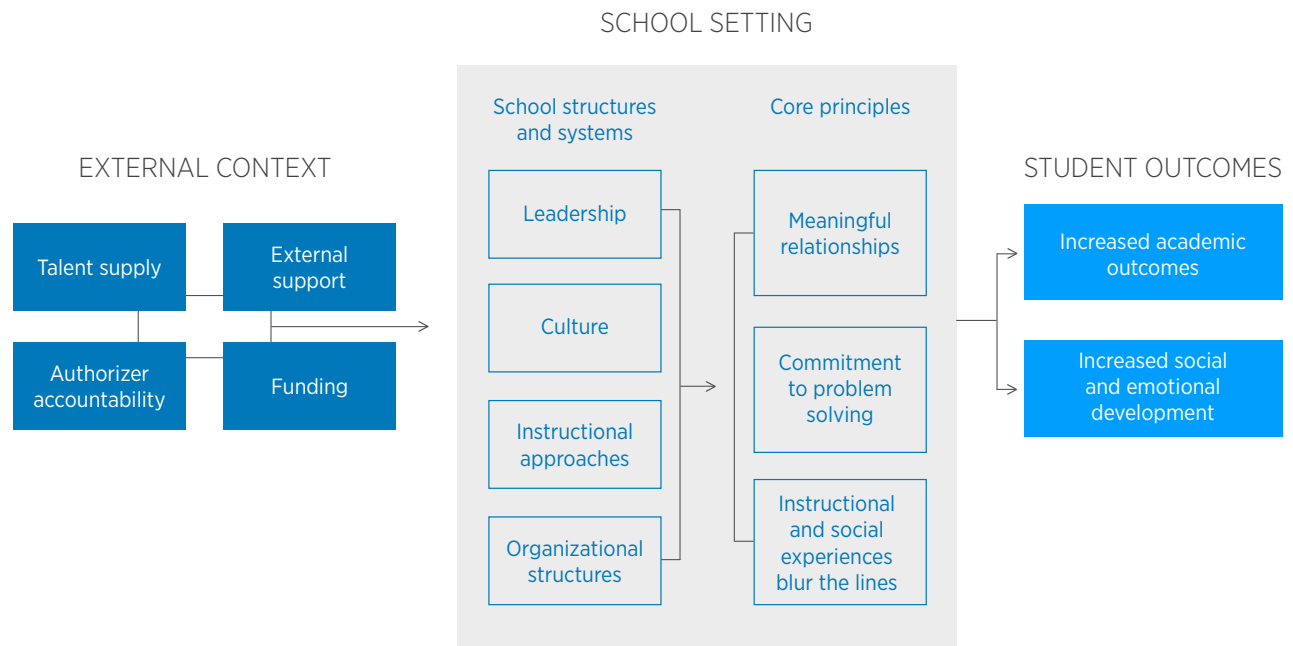
The best schools support educators with the backing and guidance of assertive leaders who prioritize students with disabilities and apply the three principles in daily practice. Leaders build cultures of mutual respect and solution seeking by providing intentional organizational structures and tools for collaboration, sharing information and problem solving, creating flexible instructional approaches that leverage data and technology, and demonstrating assertive leadership that prioritizes special education.

In the most promising charter schools² we visited, these elements all worked together in concert. Top leaders (principals and CMO executives) prioritized them. Teachers reinforced them in collaborative meetings, in classrooms, and in discussions with families and students. Even though we found few novel or particularly innovative instructional practices in these schools, we did find that they put their autonomy and commitment to data and improvement to good use. They also leveraged their charter autonomy to ensure the entire school community committed fully to their core principles and held each other accountable for delivering on them.

We also learned from these schools that the external policy and support structure can both promote and impede schools' focus on special education. The schools we studied were challenged to find, train, and keep teachers whose philosophy aligned to the three principles. Outside supports from districts, CMO central offices, regional agencies, and contractors provided expertise and services for CMOs and schools, but some schools—especially stand-alone charter schools and those in rural locales—found them difficult to access. Authorizers pushed for compliance, but rarely focused on quality. And while schools made the most of the funding they received from federal and state sources, they, like their district counterparts, must allocate funds from general operating budgets and, in some instances, private philanthropy to provide special education and related services.

Figure 1 illustrates how schoolwide principles and practices can work in concert to support student outcomes. It also shows how external policies and contexts can help or hurt schools' ability to be coherent and effective in serving students with disabilities.

FIGURE 1. Effective Special Education Relies on Integrated Action



Two points to keep in mind as you read through our findings: First, the principles and reinforcing structures are **mutually dependent**. Second, the **degree of implementation** matters.

The schools we visited exhibited a schoolwide commitment to serve every student's unique needs, to build strong student and adult relationships, and to seamlessly integrate students with unique learning needs into the instructional and social fabric of the schools. And then they go one step further by operationalizing that philosophy by cultivating an aligned school culture, intentional organizational and instructional practices, and strong leadership: the school embraces this philosophy for all students to the benefit of all students, including students with disabilities.

The three principles played out to different degrees and in different ways in the schools we visited, though teachers, principals, and parents alike attributed the principles to their ability to serve students with disabilities. At the most basic implementation, individual teachers take responsibility for ensuring that the principles were present. As the principles settled deeper into the fiber of schools, we found that routines and structures supported the core principles and ensured that they would carry on even as individual teachers and leadership moved on and new teachers and leaders found their place in the school.

But, even in schools that seemed to display the principles to a fairly high degree, school staff described aspirations to go deeper.

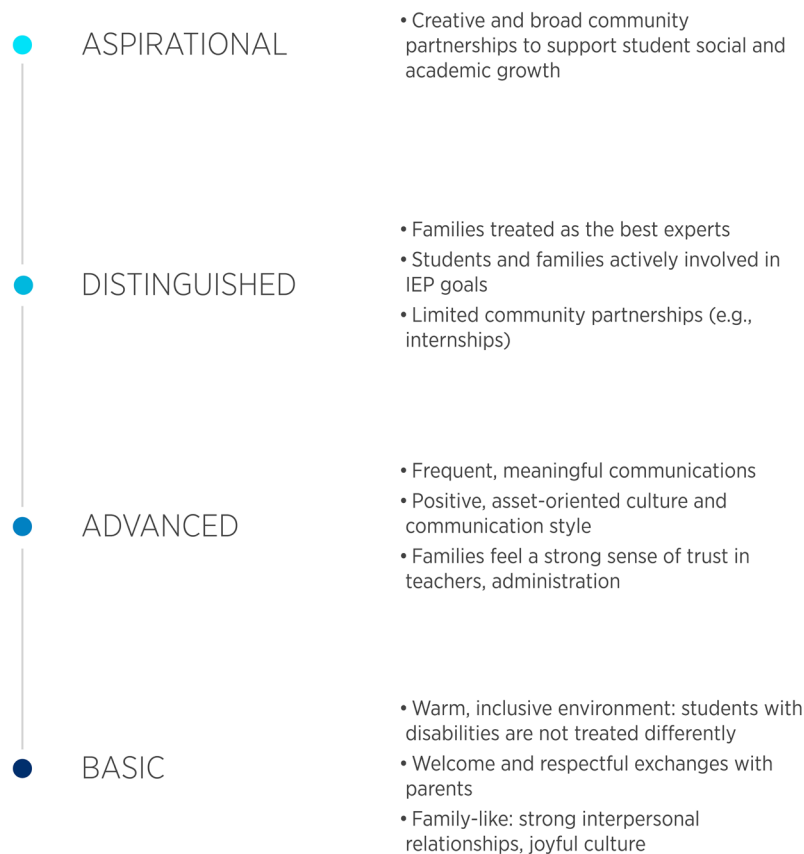
Core Principles: Relationships, Problem Solving, and Blurred Academic and Social Lines

The charter schools we studied took varied approaches to educating students with disabilities, but some schools—with the most satisfied parents, confident educators, a clear and consistent articulation of the school’s philosophy of educating students with disabilities, and strong results for students with disabilities—had three principles in common:

- 1) **Trusting relationships between schools and families** built on caring and productive communication.
- 2) An orientation toward **ongoing problem solving** to meet individual needs.
- 3) **blurred lines between special and general education** students’ instructional and social experiences, so that students with disabilities were educated with all other students most of the time and treated as full members of the school community, not stigmatized or unnecessarily isolated.

Trusting Relationships, Caring and Productive Communication

FIGURE 2. A Continuum of Meaningful Relationships



Building trusting, caring, and productive relationships and communication with students and families was a fundamental principle shaping nearly every school we visited. For many parents, the quality of their relationship with the school was why they chose and stayed at the school. Schools' relationships with their surrounding community, on the other hand, remained limited with only a handful of schools building rich partnerships that go beyond extracurricular activities.

Nearly every school we visited proved to be a joyful, safe, familial environment where parents were treated with respect—a notable contrast to many parents' experiences with previous schools. In focus groups, parents repeatedly told us that they chose their child's school because it had a good reputation for serving students with special needs. They often expressed profound gratitude and relief that their child was doing well academically (usually defined as getting good grades), wanted to be there, and was getting the help and attention they needed. They often told us how important it was to them that teachers said they liked and cared about the child.

In noting how much she values the care the school staff show her child, a parent drew a stark contrast between the school's caring environment and her child's prior experience in a large urban district school, recounting that her son told her that students slept in class and the teachers were “*not interested in your child, in your child's education.*”

It was also important to parents to feel their child was not singled out as “different” at their school or made to feel like something is wrong with them. At Renaissance Arts Academy in Los Angeles, one parent said the school's culture of inclusion was a marked difference from her son's previous school:

I find the biggest difference [at this school] is the inclusion. I think [my son] felt different at [his previous] school and like something was wrong with him. His learning program there was different from the other children. I feel like here, it's very inclusive, so he never feels like, 'Oh I have problems doing this, I have problems doing that.'

In fact, at many of the schools we visited, having an individualized education plan (IEP) was seen as something desirable, not a stigma, because kids with an IEP got more personalized attention and help.

IEPs: The Roadmap for Serving Students Individually

The IEP was introduced in 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. It serves as a contract between families and their local education agency (LEA), outlining a student's present levels of performance, post-secondary goals, annual goals (both academic and nonacademic), and the supports and services the LEA will provide to help the student achieve their goals. The IEP determines the types of special education services a student will receive. In this way, the IEP serves as the guidebook for supporting students with disabilities.

For some parents, high expectations were especially important. Parents at a small arts-focused school said they appreciated the academic expectations at the school; one talked about her daughter exiting her IEP because of the support the school provided—something previous research has noted in charter schools more broadly (see insert).

Removing Special Education Labels in Charter Schools

Several studies of New York City, Denver, Boston, and Louisiana provide evidence that, on average, charter schools are more likely to exit a student out of special education than traditional public schools, with several hypotheses about why. Some observers suggest that a financial benefit or a high compliance burden disincentivizes retaining students in special education. Other observers and some charter leaders suggest that smaller school environments coupled with the support offered to all students in the school reduce the need for special education services.

Parents expressed a high degree of trust, relief, and gratitude around a perceived culture of caring. This trust was sometimes built on relief for having escaped a bad previous situation where kids were bullied and getting poor grades. In other cases, the trust stemmed from parents perceiving that the school valued their input and treated them as a partner in their child's education. Trust and relief were often so high, in fact, that we wondered if parents' loyalty to the school might prevent them from asking whether their child was being challenged and supported as much as possible.

When communicating with families, school staff and leaders emphasized students' assets and showed a willingness to constantly problem solve with parents. One parent talked about how the school respects her and is willing to work with her—describing what these relationships look like for many parents:

They help me a lot as a parent. . . My child had a meltdown before school and I was about to have a meltdown and right away, I called [the special education director] but she wasn't available so the other therapist came. She took over and she calmed him down. I don't think you could get that at any other school. . . They're quick to help, and I like that a lot. That's something that is a big weight off my shoulders.

In schools that invested the most deeply in relationships, we found routines such as call logs, learning plans, problem solving, data systems that were open to parents, and discussion protocols that productively leveraged both parents and students in shaping the students' goals.

In contrast with the deep efforts to build relationships with parents, schools' community partnerships were thin, focused mainly on extracurricular activities and service projects—and to some degree—career-readiness, but rarely mental health or social services. Formal partnerships with local social service agencies, mental health providers, and other resources, with a handful of exceptions, were left up to families to find and pay for. Some parents noted that although they were pleased with their children's academic progress, they wished the schools would better support struggles with anxiety or depression. “We wish we had more” was a common sentiment among teachers who recognized that their school lacked sufficient mental health supports and lacked external partnerships.

Two of the schools in our study offered extensive career preparation programs. In a health care career-focused school the local hospital and health organizations helped the school to provide a rich health and science curriculum and routinely arranged for classroom visits from health professionals, tutoring in the school, and embedded learning opportunities. The second school has a long-running internship program that every student in the school experiences. The school taps a wide network of employers to support this program.

Schools in our study also partner with community organizations for enrichment activities, internships, tutoring, or service projects, such as working with a food bank, the YMCA, or outdoor programs. One school, for example, collaborates with a community organization that provides after-school tutoring support in STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) to students. As part of this partnership, students who participate in this program are eligible for STEM-related scholarships.

We found that rural schools in particular had strong community ties and often engaged their students in learning outside the school. Staff in one small-town school, for example, rely on many community partnerships to provide services and support education within the school. Organizations such as YouthBuild and the state's Department of Natural Resources regularly partner with the school on student projects, and students have recently taken class trips out of state and to Europe.

While schools did use outside contractors or district or regional providers for psychologists or social workers, rarely did they form deep community partnerships with organizations providing disability-specific expertise or supports for social and emotional health. Two rural schools, proving the exception, dedicated staff and building space to mental health services, in partnership with local providers. In one of these schools, the staff also helped students get to appointments for disability-related services in neighboring towns.

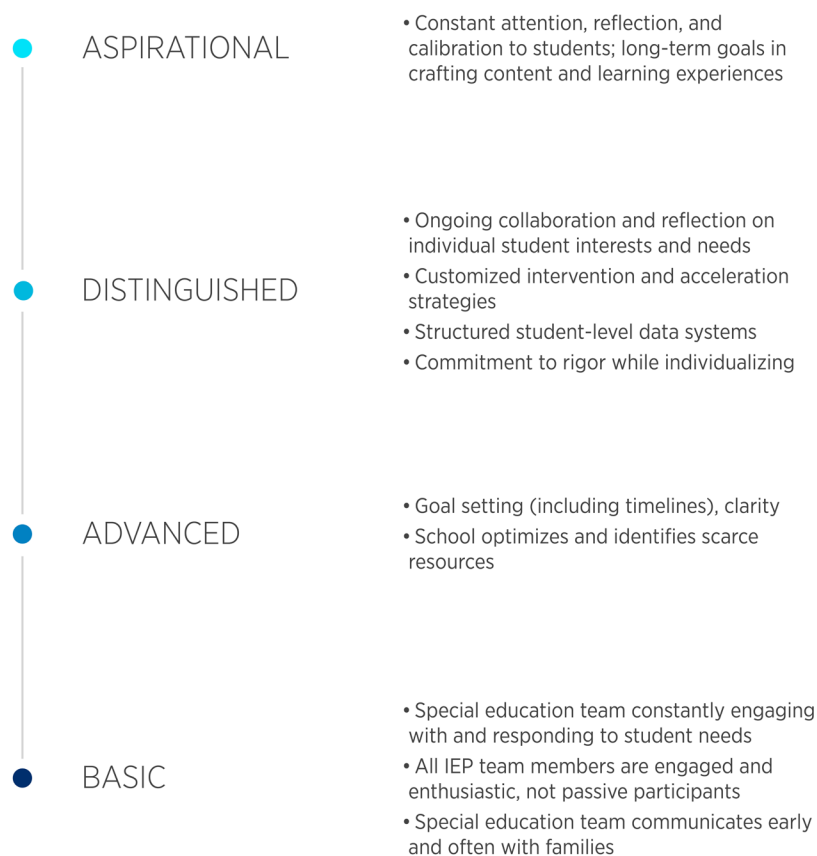
Problem Solving Around Individual Needs

The second principle we observed was commitment to individualized problem solving. Educators in these schools didn't think about special education in terms of predetermined programs or services but instead as a unique program of support deploying resources and services as needed. They readily moved students in and out of support as needed—students didn't get “stuck” in classes or support programs when their needs no longer warranted them.

At the most basic schools we found special education teams that were constantly engaging and responding to students' needs and communicating with families and general educators who enthusiastically engaged in IEP meetings. We observed strong goal-setting practices that included timelines and shared understanding of goals.

The most distinguished schools had more systematic and formal systems to support problem solving, including reflection protocols and data management systems that provide teachers with ready access to a range of data on their students. These schools, as we discuss in our section on systems and structures, organized schedules and resources to support educators to do this work. Educators in these schools also figured out how to customize without losing rigor—a challenge we noted across many schools. While our formative analysis cannot offer any formulas for balancing customization and rigor, the practices we observed in the strongest schools offer useful directions for future study.

FIGURE 3. A Continuum of Individualized Problem Solving



One special education director we met explained that she wants teachers to know the whole child with so many qualities and characteristics, not just their disability, in order to develop a plan to help them succeed:

What I really try and get the teachers to understand is . . . yes they have an IEP, yes they're a student with a disability, but that's one component of the student. I really want you to get to know that student, get to know who they are and what they embody and really help them.

For most of the schools we visited, however, finding the time and tools to discuss students' long-term goals—those that look beyond graduation—remained purely aspirational. All of the schools engaged in transition planning as required by law. However, few if any schools seemed to start this process early enough to provide students and parents with a meaningful multiyear plan for developing career or higher education interests and plans.

Blurred Academic and Social Lines

The third core principle is **blurred lines between special and general education students' instructional and social experiences**. Every school described a commitment to “inclusion” and indeed students with disabilities spent most, if not all, of their time in shared learning environments, which is very much in the spirit of the Least Restrictive Environment provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Most schools, however, also found success with specialized classes for students with significant behavioral or academic challenges.

What seemed to matter most was that schools blurred academic and social lines: at a minimum, this meant students never felt a stigma associated with receiving special education services and could participate in general education academic or extracurricular activities as much as possible. Teachers displayed an honest commitment to joint responsibility for all students.

As schools blurred lines further, we found educators who would pull students out of classrooms of their peers only if absolutely necessary. These schools still had ways to deliver more intensive support but in a highly targeted way and only when it was clear that these methods would be the best way to help students succeed in their primary classroom. Students received targeted supports only as long as they needed them. Educators in these schools constantly reflected on the role that pulling out played in children's experiences. One school leader explained that their commitment to inclusion is results-driven, not just philosophical:

Knowing that we receive a lot of students who are typically served in more of the . . . I hate to use the word segregated but the self-contained programming. They go to a little class with one teacher on the side. We have not yet found success with that model, so it's a push that we have that every kid belongs in the best environment possible with the right support.

An exceptional focus on collaborative instruction and problem solving was what we came to call “hyper collegiality.” In these classrooms it was impossible to know which teacher was a member of the general or education team by observations alone. We found that students, regardless of their designation in general or special education, would view all of the teachers in the room as their teacher. We also learned that general and special education teachers had time to plan instruction together and, critically, held that time sacred.

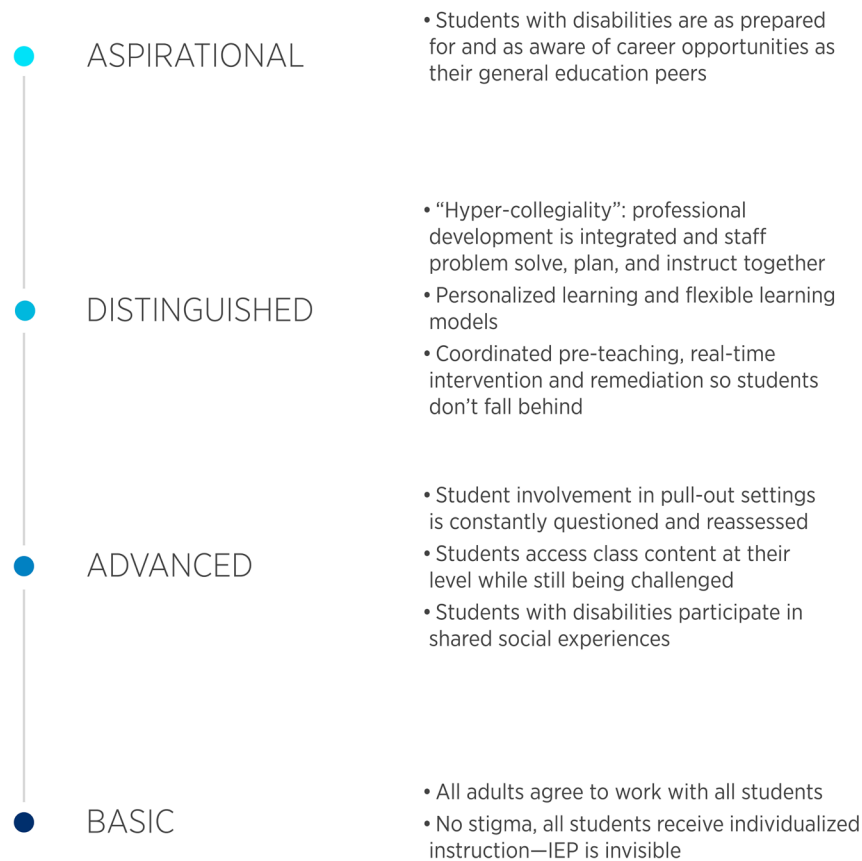
Flexibility was a hallmark of classrooms and instructional units allowing for responsive, real-time intervention. These schools also used regular data and assessment review to make sure everything was on track amid the flexibility. We also found highly flexible learning environments that allowed for real-time intervention and support.

As we noted previously in our discussion of problem solving, few schools had strong routines or systems to support long-term planning. It appears that most schools in our study had not sorted out how to prepare their students with disabilities for the transition out of K-12, at least not to the degree that they could for general education students. High-quality transition strategies was an issue across most schools in our study.

At schools that most effectively blurred lines for students, teachers regularly individualized attention for all students. A sense of shared responsibility for students flowed naturally from that instructional strategy, as this school's approach illustrates:

Students [with disabilities] feel like they're a part of the group because everything is being done for everybody, and they don't have the perception that something is different about them. We're sitting down one-on-one with them like we're sitting down one-on-one with someone else.

FIGURE 4. A Continuum of Blurred Lines in Academic and Social Experiences



Coherent Systems: Aligned Culture, Leadership, Instruction, and Organizational Structures

In the most coherent schools we studied, teachers were not left on their own to carry out the three core principles. Everything about the school was designed to help them and to reinforce a schoolwide approach. In particular we observed:

- Leadership that signals and enforces a commitment to special education.
- A schoolwide culture to serve all students uniquely and completely.
- Instructional approaches that promote shared learning, community, and individualization.
- Organizational structures that break down barriers and prioritize students with disabilities.

This section describes how the three core principles were operationalized in the schools we studied.

Leadership That Signals and Enforces a Commitment to Special Education

Across the schools we visited, we heard a consistent message: strong leadership commitment to educating students with disabilities is crucial. And, a strong philosophical commitment to personal relationships, blurred academic and social lines, intentional hiring practices, mutual accountability do not come about by accident—leaders make them happen. The small number of schools in our study where teachers and students struggled highlighted the pivotal role of leadership. In these schools, the principal or CMO leadership simply had not prioritized special education in budgeting, staffing, or messaging. While we observed and heard of examples of strong individual practices in these schools, these efforts were more piecemeal and educators were frustrated that they and the students they were trying to serve were not adequately valued, supported, and consequently, educated.

The school leader is the linchpin. Leadership at both the school and network levels set the tone for schools and provided the glue holding the system together by:

- Messaging that special education is a priority internally. In many schools, the ethos of inclusion was repeated consistently among school leaders. General education teachers were repeatedly told that students receiving special education services are their kids.
- Making strategic decisions (resource allocation, hiring, scheduling, etc.) to create the conditions described above.
- Setting norms and policies that reinforce positive, relationship-based individualized approaches to behavior.
- Elevating the voices, priorities, and leadership of the special education team in schoolwide decision making.
- Sending critical signals to families and students before and after they enroll that differences are welcomed and valued at the school.
- Taking risks on behalf of students with disabilities: supporting their special education team to advocate internally and to their CMO leadership or board for resources, programs, or other services students with disabilities might need.

Most of the leaders in our study played most of these leadership roles, but each set somewhat different priorities. Some emphasized clear messaging during the hiring process to ensure that all staff embrace a mindset of inclusion. One principal we interviewed said the two critical things he does to support educating students with disabilities at his

school are removing barriers for children and removing barriers for adults. In his view, removing barriers for children means running an organized school where things are clearly communicated, where systems are consistent, where the culture doesn't allow bullying. He explained:

We don't have a culture where you are overly disciplined because of the manifestation of your disability. And those are things [the school's culture and approach to discipline] that I have direct control over as the principal.

Removing barriers for adults, to this building leader, was more about supporting the initiative and vision of teacher leadership. He described how his special education director noticed a need to improve how teachers at the school accommodate disabilities effectively:

So you met with [the special education director] earlier today. I think she is incredible. She also has a very clear vision for what she wants the [special education] team to look like here, and what she wants the students in [special education] to be able to accomplish. It's my responsibility to allow her to unleash that. So when she has initiatives, I see my role as not vetoing but guiding and helping her to communicate that vision.

This special education director planned a number of initiatives, including a series of instructional videos to be included in the principal's weekly message, a professional development session on accommodations, and some accommodation cards that help students advocate for what they need. She also started an initiative around co-coaching where she works with the general education teachers' coach; she and the principal essentially coach the special and general educators together.

Another teacher spoke about how she and her CMO have worked to address disproportionate suspensions among students with disabilities:

Back in the day, in the beginning we used to suspend everybody. . . Here, we said to all the principals, 'You shouldn't see students with IEPs have more suspensions out of school than students without IEPs.' It should be proportional, right, to the general population.

Making special education a priority. The leaders we met took different routes to their commitment to special education. Some principals in our study had a background in special education or a personal connection to someone with a disability. For instance, one principal had a brother with Down syndrome, and another principal and a director of special education have children with significant disabilities. Others simply reported evolving to recognize that educating students with disabilities well is a key manifestation of a larger commitment to equity. Another director of special education had been a student receiving support through special education. Other leaders found inspiration in the families—many of whom came to their school after years of frustration navigating special education in other schools.

Regardless of the source of their commitment, we found that the strongest leaders knew the influence of their own language and messaging in setting the culture of the school. They were unequivocal in messaging and using their bully pulpit as leaders to communicate their priority to serve every student to the highest level possible, as the following comment from a network principal conveys:

A kid shouldn't fail if they're a student [with a disability]—if they're here every day, why are they failing? Every bit of the support that we have in place should help us to identify where the students are struggling and who do we need to make sure to circle back with?

Leaders were also well aware that strategic decisions could reinforce or crush the efforts to provide a coherent and schoolwide commitment to students with disabilities: how leaders organized their team, how they hired staff, and how they organized teachers' and students' schedules. The strongest leaders thoughtfully pursued many of the systems and structures described above. They also often elevated the special education team into a position of schoolwide leadership.

One principal explained how he reinforces his school's values by looking for two important qualities during the interview process:

The first thing I'm looking for is a high expectation despite whatever kind of IEP or [disability category]. The second thing I'm looking for is an excitement around that. The third thing I'm looking for is an understanding of why a kid might struggle and not a judgment.

The principal looks for special education teachers who have the ability to diagnose the root cause behind a student struggling or acting out in class. Whether it's a struggle in math or anxiety about a peer interaction, he believes "you can't see behavior as the root cause." And he looks for general education teachers who can work well in teams. "You need to be a team player if you're going to work with a special education teacher."

Elevating the status of and supporting the special education team. In most of the schools we visited, the director of special education had a high-level position within the school, reporting directly to the building leader and often sitting on the building leadership team. Elevating and empowering the special education director and team conveyed the importance of educating students with disabilities. More importantly, it meant that creating effective learning environments for students with disabilities ranked prominently in hiring decisions, professional development, operational planning, and goal setting for the organization. We learned that the special education director and principal worked together closely to assess special education data, discuss individual students, adjust course configurations and, when part of a network, advocate for more resources from the home office. At one rural school in our study, the director of special education sat on the hiring committee for all staff in the building and mapped out professional development for the entire faculty.

When leaders bring the messaging, operations, and shared leadership together, educators feel that the path is not only clear but that they have backing to build and maintain a schoolwide program to best serve their students. As we heard in one school:

The reason why we are able to maintain a program where we all take ownership is because that has been the expectation from the get-go. When the school started, the level of expectation from [the principal and special education director] was, 'This is what we do here.' All the new people hold each other accountable for that.

The principal also plays a key role in ensuring that the special education teachers are adequately supported and feel valued. A principal in one school described how nearly losing a great special education director compelled her to think about how the director and her team were supported. At a school from one of the networks in our study the principal saw that support as a critical strategy to retain her best teachers:

[Our special education director] wanted to quit after two years, she was like, 'I'm done.' My goal was to make her happier. How do I get her to feel as though her students were being treated equitably? I have to prioritize [our special educators]. We use our local control funding to have extra money to pay them for pull-out for writing IEPs, to pay them for co-teaching and coplanning pull-out. Professionals really appreciate being respected in that way.

The leadership role of CMOs. For schools that are part of a network, the network leader's posture toward students with disabilities is another avenue for leadership signaling and shapes what can happen in schools. At one network, support for a program dedicated to students with profound disabilities extends to the CEO of the network, who ensures that the school has the resources it needs to succeed. A teacher explained, "I feel really lucky to be a part of a network that's like, 'Yep, this is what we do here, and this is the norm.'"

When school or network leaders are more ambivalent toward or delegate concern for students with disabilities, teachers and principals described a continual effort to advocate for greater funding and attention. In one school we visited (one that was not included for unusually strong outcomes), a special education teacher told us she was continually asking the leadership for specialized curriculum to help her students accelerate, but was repeatedly denied.

At times, leaders took on considerable risks to defend the needs of students with disabilities at their schools. Several schools in our study arrived at a very uncomfortable conclusion that the rigid discipline models they believed

contributed to the school's prior academic success had the effect of denying access to learning and deepening the stress and frustration of students with disabilities. They found it necessary to shift to more positive behavior models, add more flexibility, and build strategies and commit resources toward addressing the root causes of disruptive behavior. They had to make these changes with considerable uncertainty as to how these new models would affect the entire school.

Some schools that had traditionally prized graduation and college matriculation above all goals explored a broader range of pathways to post-secondary success to include two-year colleges, associate degrees, and rigorous vocational preparation and certification programs. The leaders in these schools remained adamant that most of the students with disabilities could succeed in college with the right preparation and support, but also recognized that some would not go that route or might pursue that pathway in nontraditional ways.

School and network leaders are uniquely positioned to guide a school or network through the kind of reflection that leads to fundamental shifts in core values or ways of working.

A Culture to Serve All Students Uniquely and Completely

The strong family-like relationships, blurred academic and social lines, and commitment to individualized solutions we observed in schools did not happen by accident. They were a product of very intentional work to 1) establish and continually reinforce clear norms and expectations, 2) encourage frequent and positive communication with parents and among faculty, 3) build mutual trust and accountability among adults in the school, 4) develop positive behavior and discipline strategies, and 5) involve all students—even those with the most significant disabilities—in all school activities. Formal and informal routines helped educators in the school to share, discuss, and reinforce these norms and values.

Frequent and positive communication. In nearly all of the schools we visited, parents described a high level of trust and comfort with the school staff, gained through frequent and positive communication.

Many of the schools in our study had open-door policies for families and more formalized “family councils.” Parents felt comfortable stopping by and calling whenever they wished, and appreciated that teachers and administrators would get back to them quickly, and that communication was “frequent and useful.” For many parents we spoke with, the level and nature of communication stood in stark contrast to experiences they had in other schools where they would get the “runaround” or be forced to talk to the “middle-man.”

An unambiguous point of contact—someone the parent felt comfortable calling or texting about any matters concerning their child—anchored that communication. In some schools, the special education director plays a pivotal role, problem-solving for parents and facilitating communication with the rest of the school. In other schools we found communication with parents to be more distributed across staff, with parents building strong relationships with their child's special education teacher (sometimes referred to as a case manager), advisory teacher, or even their classroom teacher. As one parent explained:

It's pretty much an open communication with [the school's special education director]. And that's why we stay here. . . She just made it very comfortable. That's my key person throughout everything. . .

Teachers constantly tried to find the best method of communication, individualized to particular family needs. For example, a teacher might text with one child's parent but email another child's parent, because they knew that was the best mode of communication for each.

Parents liked knowing who the point of contact was and that the contact knew their role and responsibility to sustain communication. One school we visited required all teachers to make (and log) bi-weekly calls with parents. The special education director said she thought this communication effort helped explain recent increases in parent participation at IEP meetings for the school's highest-need students.

The nature of communication also mattered. School staff and leaders focused on positive and constructive communication with parents—not an endless series of phone calls about what has gone wrong. In one of the rural schools in our study, both general education and special education teachers reached out regularly to parents to communicate both good and bad news about their children and incorporate parent suggestions into strategies for supporting the student at school. One special education teacher described the relationship with her students' parents as “like a bank account”: you have to make lots of deposits of good news so that there is trust to rely on when challenges arise and the teacher needs help from parents.

Partnering with parents and students to find solutions and set goals. In schools where relationships with parents were strongest and deepest, parents talked about their relationship as a partnership with the staff, and staff described engaging parents to help identify solutions and strategies as issues came up. Often this happens within the framework of the IEP, which by law should be developed and monitored as a partnership between educators, parents, and students. In one illustration, a teacher described collaborating with a parent on setting IEP goals:

About a week ago I was writing an IEP for a student, and I could not think of a goal for that student. . . So then I gave the parent some ideas, and the parent chose one. She said, ‘Okay. Collect data and get back to me.’ So I collected the data and got back to her, and we agreed upon the exact goal together. I try not to do anything that the parent doesn’t think is important.

In another school that is part of a CMO we learned that teachers make a concerted effort to ensure that parents understand their children’s IEP and progress, rather than just treating the plan or meeting as a checklist or *pro forma* exercise. One parent in the school explained, “They let me have my opinion [in the IEP meeting]. . . That’s what I like about it because they let me have my opinion.” Parents in this school said that teachers take their time and explain what’s going on so that parents feel engaged and part of the experience. Elsewhere in that CMO, teachers used visual aids to help parents understand complicated concepts—such as where students are performing in standard deviation units.

At another school, teachers reported that parent input is fully included in IEPs and that parents are “full partners” in pushing for goals and accommodations. This was reflected in very positive feedback about the experience during parent focus groups where they reported that decisions here are not made without them.

In a handful of schools, we learned of efforts to more fully engage students in setting and assessing their IEP goals. One of the networks in our study has a focused initiative on building students’ agency and advocacy in classrooms and during the IEP process. This effort has been noticed and appreciated by parents. One parent noted:

[My daughter] gives her opinion on her performances [during the IEP meeting]. They do a lot of coaching on self awareness so that she knows like, ‘Oh I need to do this.’ Or, ‘This is how I feel about my grades now,’ which is good. A lot of teenagers need that.

These examples of parent involvement in the IEP meeting notwithstanding, we noted that special educators often spoke in vague terms about how they engage parents in the IEP process (aside from saying they engaged them during the IEP meeting) and rarely mentioned consulting parents prior to IEPs to discuss IEPs, student progress, or desired goals. Parents we spoke with confirmed that their involvement in IEP development and review was consistent with legal expectations but rarely more than that.

All adults feel responsible for all students’ success. When we asked teachers in schools with strong cultures who was responsible for the success of students with disabilities, they said “everyone” with no hesitation. The sense of joint accountability was clear in classrooms when:

- Teachers worked with any student whether that student was in their program or not.
- General education teachers collaborated with the special education team to provide accommodations or modify assignments.
- Teachers reached out to each other to troubleshoot an issue a student might be having in their class.

In schools where this sense of mutual accountability and team culture was dominant, staff never felt they were alone when it came to sorting out the stickiest issues. When that culture was lacking, we found teachers who felt isolated, overwhelmed, and struggling. One special education teacher described her frustration and disappointment at the lack of collaboration with her general education colleagues, who she referred to as “on the other side.”

Exasperated, she remarked:

I've given [the general education teacher] all the tools, I've showed her the websites, I've given her books, I've collaborated with her. I don't know what else I can do besides pull [the student] myself. As a gen ed teacher that is not teaching you how to effectively teach special education students. It's basically just saying, 'Here, let me just put a bandaid over a wound and let me take care of the situation.'

I feel like I could go see my director and be like, 'This isn't happening,' and then go to [the special education director] and say, 'This isn't happening.' I feel like it would be me nagging, just complaining. I don't feel like it would be taken 100-percent seriously.

I feel like because of the lack of support and the lack of being heard [by my general education colleague] . . . I'm a bit frustrated. My work ethic is still good, I can do all of this over and over again, I can do all the things—dot all the I's and cross all the t's—but what are you guys doing for us on the other side? Nobody is hearing me, nobody is seeing the situations that are going on in our classroom.

In contrast, one of the CMOs we studied builds a culture of joint responsibility by having special and general education teams evaluated with the same methods and supported in the same ways, as well as having them attend the same professional development workshops. Mutual accountability and team culture is formed with intention. A network administrator explains:

Our special education teachers are considered part of the staff. There was a very, very conscious decision . . . that was done with the intention of having them be accountable the same as every other teacher. They are evaluated with the same method as the regular teacher. . . They get supported the same as every other teacher.

That has helped us integrate the adults, and the culture is built on knowing that every student matters and every student counts. . . For us, the general education teachers also have to take ownership of that success and the progress of our students with disabilities.

All students engage in the social life of school. Parents we interviewed described relief and gratitude that their child no longer felt “different.”

This sense of belonging had roots in the schools' instructional approach—a point we discuss in detail in this section—but also in the connections students built with each other. We visited schools where students displayed genuine caring and camaraderie with their fellow students, including students with disabilities. One school in our study hosted a center for students with more significant disabilities. Students assigned to this program spent the bulk of their academic day there. Still, the staff worked hard to support these students in the school's social spaces, such as the lunch room. Several schools used social cohort models to create opportunities for students to engage socially and emotionally and for students with IEPs to be part of an integrated culture.

Arts, sports, and maker spaces in schools provided opportunities for students to build relationships with each other and for students with disabilities to shine. At one school, our research team and the entire student body were treated to a rock concert in which every member of the band had an IEP. At another school, a young woman who was accompanied by an aide throughout the day had the lead role in the drama class production. At yet another school, a student who struggled to engage with other students worked with teachers separately to learn the dance routine that the class would perform. On the day of the performance, he joined his class on stage. As the student's parent explained:

I thought he wasn't going to be able to do [the performance] at all. I was like, 'Oh, he's not going to do this. He hasn't danced all year with the group. . . ' I didn't think it was going to happen, but he went on stage and he performed and he learned all the steps just by looking at the video and I'm all like, 'How did he do this?' I was amazed. I was really amazed.

Approaches to behavior and discipline build on the positive. Researchers often described the environments as “calm,” rarely noting any observed outbursts from students. In fact, the median school in our study suspended less than 3 percent of their students for one or more days. While the average rate was higher for students with disabilities (5.1 percent), [this rate is substantially lower than the average](#) for students with disabilities in charter schools (12.3 percent) or district schools (11.6 percent) nationally.

To be sure, the schools we visited all had to deal with issues of student behavior and discipline. But most schools managed discipline with a degree of flexibility and with an emphasis on proactive, personalized, nonpunitive strategies. They tended to emphasize psychological supports to manage behavior and surface the root cause of students' struggles.

Schools we studied benefited from their relatively small size and small classes, but they also made explicit efforts to build strong bonds between students and adults and among adults as a way to mitigate and address any behavior issues. Teachers in one school reported that advisory—a scheduled time for groups of students and faculty to meet about nonacademic topics and issues which we found in 11 of the schools we studied—provides a space for teachers to know their students personally, catch early warning signs of potential problems, and intervene accordingly.

As with all other aspects of the schools, we noted that nearly all schools discussed taking a personalized but not ad hoc approach to discipline. As an example, one school integrated their MTSS (multi-tier system of support) with their behavior models into a “Comprehensive Behavioral Health Model.” This system of support enables the school to promote positive behaviors, improve mental health interventions, and increase prevention strategies. The school complements the behavior health model with a “Behavior Intervention Monitoring Assessment System,” a universal screening tool that measures social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in adolescents. When serious disciplinary issues do arise, the Student Support Team reviews the incident, identifies who was responsible, and establishes next steps by identifying appropriate interventions (e.g., a behavior plan, weekly check-ins, daily check-ins / check-outs). The principal of this school described how this system plays out in practice:

Part of what [the Student Support Team] does is call people in for a hearing to determine what is going to take place. They review the act, who was responsible, and what are our next steps. Part of those next steps is establishing an intervention. It could be something like a behavior plan and the parent is part of that meeting, a behavior plan setting up weekly check-ins or sometimes we do a check-in, check-out.

More than one third of our schools explicitly reported adopting a positive behavior support model that acknowledges and rewards positive behavior as opposed to punitive systems that penalize students for negative behavior. In these schools teachers described efforts to celebrate students' successes, to “not punish but teach”: focusing on interventions that change behavior for the better and using missteps and unproductive behavior as an opportunity to learn.

While we learned that almost a quarter of the schools in our study use a demerit system that penalizes negative behavior, we found that educators in most of these schools implemented these systems with flexibility. For example, in one school that uses what might be called a “light touch” demerit system (negative behavior is noted and contributes minimally to students' grades), teachers did not distribute demerits automatically with small infractions. Instead, for example, they tended to overlook lateness—an offense that could warrant a demerit—if students arrived quickly and got to their work without disruption. We also observed teachers discussing why students' behavior was off and how to remedy that, instead of immediately applying demerits.

In interviews with school leaders and teachers, we learned that the current approach to discipline we witnessed was, for several schools, new and the result of serious reflection on the implications of the more rigid systems they applied in the past. One principal, capturing a sentiment heard across our study, explained:

Back in the day, in the beginning we used to suspend everybody. . . We said to all the principals, 'You shouldn't see students with IEPs have more suspensions out of school than students without IEPs.' It should be proportional, right, to the general population.

Especially kids who are intentionally trying to get out of school . . . we've been learning over the years about avoidance behavior and the ABCs of behavior and what's the antecedent, what's the behavior, what's the consequence. They always want the consequence of being out of class because it's hard. [Our thinking shifted to], 'Okay, you need a break. You need this, you need that. Let's put you back in class.' We've improved a lot. I haven't suspended a student with special needs in a couple years.

A principal in another network school talked about why moving away from a rigidly punitive system was particularly effective for students with disabilities:

[Under the old system] It was very easy to earn a lot of consequences, and I think for students with IEPs that kinda put them in this box, especially the students with [social-emotional disabilities], put them in this box where they're like, 'I'm gonna explode.'

This principal also noted that doing away with the rigid system allowed teachers and students to consistently discuss issues of academic concern—not just behavior infractions.

So with the more liberties we've given them, the happier they've been and the better they've done in classes. Four years ago I remember you could be giving [instructional] notes to students and you'd look around and maybe there would be four or five [students] that would have nothing written on their paper. In our class today, everyone had every note taken, and it was just like, 'This is what's important is that you're in class and you're taking notes, and we've switched our priority to work completion and things like that,' as opposed to, 'Oh, those shoes aren't uniform' or 'You don't have a belt today.' I think the kids feel like, 'I'm here to learn,' and they feel happier because they know what will bring them consequences as opposed to feeling like us vs. them. We're all on the same team, we're all doing the same things.

As the schools reassessed the value of more rigid exclusionary discipline, they also began seeing discipline through the lens of mental health. Teachers and school leaders across our study, in urban and rural schools alike, described the high number of students who experienced depression or anxiety and the number of students living with or recovering from trauma. Their approach to discipline has increasingly acknowledged the impact of trauma on children, the need to ensure students' physical, psychological, and emotional safety in any response to behavioral concerns, and involved mental health professionals in an effort to uncover and address the root causes of disruptive behavior.

The school adopting the Comprehensive Behavioral Health Model, described above, in part designed the effort to respond to a rise in social and emotional health needs of students. The tool measures the social, emotional, and behavioral functioning in students and provides robust data about students' academic and socio-emotional needs, through which the school has identified one particular area of concern: whether each student is developing and maintaining positive relationships.

Multiple schools in our study sought ways to add social workers and psychologists to their staff, to partner with external mental health providers and agencies, and to train their staff in behavior models and interventions grounded in good mental health awareness and practice. They did this with the hope and expectation that, as one special education teacher stated, "Sometimes you can love a child into learning."

Instructional Approaches That Promote a Shared Learning Community and Individualization

A school's approach to instruction—how teachers guide and engage students with academic content, the nature of student assignments and assessment—is built around solid instructional practices that have implications for whether all students feel they are a part of the learning community regardless of their needs or disability. Teachers who best supported students with disabilities, along with their peers, not only displayed strong instructional practice but also used flexible classroom structures, frequent assessment, project-based or experiential curriculum, and technology to facilitate their work.

Few of the schools explicitly mentioned [universal design for learning \(UDL\)](#), the principle of designing instruction and classroom environments in a way that all students can engage and access learning. Nonetheless, principles of UDL - thoughtful differentiation of content and learning activities and providing students with different ways to demonstrate their knowledge - came through in many classrooms we visited.

Where classroom community was strong and personalized, teachers gave students access to the same content. In these classrooms, educators—often more than one—intervened seamlessly and in real time to support students by grouping and regrouping them with little or no regard to who had an IEP. Students with disabilities readily accessed tools for accommodations or modified assignments with little public attention. Students worked with each other and rarely seemed to be distracted even as their classmates engaged in different activities in other areas of the classroom.

First things first, strong instructional practice sets a foundation for success.

Research demonstrates that a strong program for students with disabilities can only be built on a foundation of strong instructional practice in the general education classroom. Effective learning experiences for students with disabilities start with classroom teachers who deftly differentiate and manage classrooms and have strong instructional practice—referred to as “Tier 1” instruction within the response to intervention (RTI) framework. Directors of special education also made clear that fundamental skills for general education teachers include an understanding of accommodations and modifications, how to balance rigor and support, and principles of goal-setting for students.

Tier 1 Instruction: The Foundation of Effective Instruction for Students with Disabilities

Several studies of New York City, Denver, Boston, and Louisiana provide evidence that, on average, charter schools are more likely to exit a student out of special education than traditional public schools, with several hypotheses about why. Some observers suggest that a financial benefit or a high compliance burden disincentivizes retaining students in special education. Other observers and some charter leaders suggest that smaller school environments coupled with the support offered to all students in the school reduce the need for special education services.

Most of the schools in our study displayed a relatively strong foundation of instructional practice—many of them benefiting from a stable, experienced teaching staff. Where the general education teachers struggled, so did students with disabilities, and the special education team was often unable to meet the demands this necessitated.

A special education director in one school where we observed uneven instructional quality across classrooms noted the challenge of teacher turnover and inexperienced teachers:

I think a lot of the challenges come from having so many newer teachers. Differentiation and accommodation in their classrooms is really hard to get them to do or conceptualize in their own brain.

Last year her special education team met several times with each of the academic departments to talk about accommodations and their implementation with the goal of improving consistency in how they provided accommodations to students. They worked to get dedicated schoolwide professional development time so they could work with all teachers on the basics of accommodations and modifications. They were also starting to do more training about co-teaching, which creates a better system of collaboration so that special educators can support with more intensive accommodations and modifications outside of what teachers should be able to do as foundational instructional practice.

A more common challenge we observed, even in schools with relatively sound foundations in instructional practice, was balancing rigor and accommodation. We observed several classrooms where students with disabilities did not appear to be challenged by their assignments when teachers tried to give material they saw as accessible. Finding this balance in the daily work of the classroom is largely left to teachers' professional judgement, with only limited data to help them. Teachers generally reported that they keep close tabs on what students had already accomplished but, when pressed, many seemed less certain that their current expectations for students really reflected the limits of their students' capacity at that point in time. When asked whether teachers attempted to push the limits on challenging students, few teachers considered doing so for students. For example, we found that only the most savvy teachers felt comfortable testing whether and what students could achieve without an accommodation or with more challenging work.

Flexibility in schedules and instructional approach makes personalization possible

Teachers need latitude in time, content sequence and pacing, and student assignment to respond to their students' different needs and interests. Structures such as longer learning blocks and extended time to work independently allow special education teachers to push in and provide embedded, real-time support for other teachers. Interdisciplinary classes can put more teachers in a room with students, allowing adults to provide more personalized support to all students.

Pittsburgh's City Charter High School's 9th-grade humanities class takes advantage of longer learning blocks and interdisciplinary classes to provide a highly flexible learning environment. These classes, with 60 students in a two-hour block, are led by two content specialists and several supporting teachers. When we observed the class, five teachers were present in the classroom. One of the lead teachers provided the whole group with periodic direction and facilitated discussions. The remaining teachers floated around, providing one-on-one help as students needed assistance, and pulled together small groups when they noticed multiple students stuck in the same place. This approach ensures that students who are struggling don't get left behind or slip under the radar while also meeting all students at their individual academic level.

The schools we visited commonly employed a co-teaching model with a general and special educator, although few classrooms achieved "parallel" co-teaching where teachers shared leadership roles. Parallel co-teaching, especially in high schools, requires a relatively high level of content knowledge from both teachers and ample time to co-create and plan lessons—two conditions that were difficult for many of the schools in our study to meet. While true parallel teaching seemed to allow for the most fluid exchange between special and general educators and among students, simply having multiple teachers in the classroom did provide some flexibility to serve students responsively. It also increased the likelihood that students with disabilities received individual attention, even if this was most often from the special educator.

Classrooms that used a project- or inquiry-based approach—where students are presented with complex, often interdisciplinary, problems to work through—also seemed well suited to differentiation and personalization. Six of the schools in our study used a project- or inquiry-based approach. We found that these curriculum and instructional models allowed for fluid and undetected adjustments, modifications, and supports for students with disabilities. Instructional units in these schools—organized around projects or topics of inquiry—generally extend over several weeks, had multiple components, could readily incorporate extension elements, and allowed for more individualized

pacing. These projects can also be designed to engage different types and styles of learning. At another rural school, where students spend almost half their day working independently on projects, one teacher explained:

With project-based [learning], you're getting away from that textbook and worksheet. Students get to design their own education, so yeah, I have to meet the standards of government, but I can do it through a project and I can take it a lot further, and I can still meet that standard. A lot of our kids need hands-on. They need to be up and moving. They need to be able to build something, create something...

Teachers in a school designed around the Montessori model found that the time required for independent learning and allowing students to make choices in their learning led them to provide highly differentiated support. Teachers routinely offered content in multiple formats, including teacher-led discussion, videos, or written content. Units are presented to students as “study guides” that they can self-pace through. By giving students independence to progress through these guides, teachers have ample time to check in with students and provide any individualized support students require. In this context, special education instruction is an extra layer of support on top of an already differentiated, individualized approach—not something that is distinct from the general education program.

Even in more traditionally structured classrooms (single subject and about 45 minutes) we found teachers who were able to quickly pivot if circumstances required. Administrators and teachers were also willing to move students to new classes for short-term targeted assistance if they felt it would benefit the student. Students’ supports and services were always viewed as changeable. One special education teacher captured this disposition toward flexibility in a traditional classroom:

We're really flexible. I'll work in the classroom with the kids. I'll teach parts of the lesson. I will teach a whole lesson when I have to or I will pull kids [out of class for direct interventions].

Despite their adept use in several of the schools we visited, highly personalized instructional approaches are difficult for teachers to implement well. Allowing students to craft their own learning experiences and manage their own pace comes with the risk of lowering expectations and dampening rigor. Studies of personalized learning, including those [conducted by CRPE](#), imply schools should not adopt these instructional models casually or without serious consideration of the skills and resources—especially in terms of the time teachers have to plan and work with students—needed to properly implement these models.

Frequent assessment and data analysis assures progress

Early and regular assessment, data analysis, and strategic responses are key to keeping these flexible environments on track. Teachers in schools across our study described using different types and combinations of data and tools to access them. Regardless of the specific approach, teachers used several types and sources of data, engaged students in conversations about their data, and, in many cases, had platforms that housed data and facilitated their use. For students with disabilities, these practices helped teachers improve instructional delivery, provide more effective services, and develop better IEPs.

Audeo, an independent study school in San Diego, we profile, targets students who are behind in credits. Data is the backbone of this program. Every student is assessed upon enrollment and a curriculum and learning plan is put in place. Teachers closely monitor students’ progress. Each student has individualized goals related to the course they are taking. General and special educators track students’ course progress in the school’s learning management system daily. Teachers routinely discuss progress with their students. The team also collects data on student attendance and engagement. These data are also used to hold all staff and centers—the locations where students meet with their instructors—accountable for their students’ success.

Cleveland’s [Citizens Leadership Academy](#), another school we [profile](#), is a more traditional school model than Audeo but no less directed by data. Special and general education teachers use NWEA MAP data to make an initial assessment of a student’s level, then continually monitor and reassess their skill level with data from learning software. Teachers use these data to group and regroup students and set learning targets. Bell ringers and exit tickets provide daily checks on learning to let teachers know if the day’s goals have been met. Data are also used to recommend struggling students—

those with and without IEPs—for various interventions that are held during school hours, as well as after school and Saturdays. Teachers also routinely meet with students to discuss their data and what they mean.

Schools we studied commonly used platforms that aggregated and housed their data. Generally, the most sophisticated tools were off-the-shelf learning management software (Edgenuity, PowerSchool), though we did see inventive use of collaboration software akin to what is provided in the Google Classroom suite. One of the more interesting, if still nascent, trends we observed was teachers' use of data platforms to collect and share more qualitative information on students. For example, teachers in one school we visited had started using students' data profiles to share tips on supporting or observations about the challenges of an individual student. Teachers who taught this student had easy access to useful information and a quick way to find out who else was working with a student. For students with disabilities, who receive supports and services from various teachers and providers, this type of system has the potential to help everyone stay on the same page.

Technology helps to personalize and deliver accommodations and modifications

Finally, technology tools in some schools facilitated the simple and undetected implementation of academic modifications and accommodations. Concerns about the amount of screen time students are exposed to, student privacy, and unequal access to digital and online technologies in and out of school are important concerns to bear in mind when turning to educational technology solutions. Still, we found that technology can provide teachers with a powerful tool to support the inclusion and education of students with disabilities.

In the schools we visited, technology allowed students to manage some of their own accommodations, such as text to speech or enlarged text. Teachers readily used e-mail or other Google Classroom tools to deliver modified assignments or accommodations to students with disabilities. When all of the students have devices, it is easy for teachers to accommodate students with IEPs seamlessly and without stigma. As one parent explained:

[My son] has used a Neoboard3 and a computer from the time he was in 3rd grade because his handwriting is indiscernible. He started [9th grade] off with a computer, and so did all the other kids. He really felt totally similar as opposed to being this different kid. So that created a whole new world for him, plus all of the technology that you get on that computer to support him. He doesn't constantly need [a teacher or aide] hanging on his side.

Collaborative platforms facilitated communication between students and teachers and made it easy for a team of teachers to look in on students' work. At a career-focused school in our study, for example, special education teachers accessed their students' Google Classroom suites. Special educators could view assignments, assessments, progress, and general educators' notes and lesson plans, and then plan out the work they will do with their students with disabilities each week.

The instructional approaches described in this section reinforce a common objective: to ensure that special education is not a distinct and separate program in a school but rather a set of supports and services delivered to students in learning settings that are designed for all students in the school. A commitment to personalization for all students, flexibility in learning settings, strategic use of student data—both academic and nonacademic—as well as an openness to technology in the classroom helps teachers to create classrooms where supports to students can be delivered fluidly, in real time, often without stigma or notice from their peers, and can change as needed.

For a more detailed discussion of inclusive technology practices, see [Inclusive Technology in a 21st Century Learning System](#) from the National Center for Learning Disabilities.

Organizational Structures That Break Down Barriers and Prioritize Students with Disabilities

Organizational structures provide the resources, incentives, and opportunities for teachers to collaborate, problem solve, or personalize. Charter schools can use many ways to take advantage of their autonomy and flexibility to support the three core principles but hiring, resource allocation, and information systems were among the most impactful organizational structures we saw in schools.

Teachers are hired for a disposition toward inclusion, collaboration, and problem solving. The three principles highlighted by this report—meaningful relationships, problem solving, and integration—are highly social and hinge on the beliefs and capacities of adults in schools. Accordingly, hiring educators who are a good match for a school’s approach to special education and professional culture was a critical organizational support for the success of the schools in this study. Even though nearly every school we visited confronted a limited pool of special education candidates, it did not stop them from approaching the hiring process with intensity and rigor.

Most of the schools we studied took an information-rich approach to hiring teachers. They used a multistage process: candidates interviewed with multiple stakeholder groups, spent extended time visiting the school, and demonstrated their teaching with practice lessons. Intense hiring activities like these are not uncommon in charter schools.⁴ But the schools in this study went further. They infused their information-rich hiring practices with specific questions and messages that underscored the school’s commitment to and expectations for all educators, special and general alike.

When hiring general educators, for example, principals told us they asked candidates explicit questions about differentiation that they felt were relevant to special education. One school asked candidates, “What techniques would you consider important in developing a plan to cooperate with other teachers in the building with respect to the inclusion of students with special needs?” “What information in a student’s Individual Education Plan is the teacher of record responsible for?” “What do you believe the special education teacher’s role is in an inclusion setting?” The same school also asked more subtle questions designed to get at how the candidate would work with students with special needs: “How would you handle a student who refuses to follow your directives or complete their assigned work?”

Some schools used scenario questions to gauge how candidates might respond to challenges students with disabilities could present in the classroom. A recently hired general educator in one school recounted his experience:

Throughout the interview, they were like, ‘How would you handle this?’ And they’d throw out different situations, like students that have this need or this need. So it was very detailed and I knew that I was going to come into a school that was very aware of that special needs area.

This teacher knew from the interview that the school focused on the inclusion of students with disabilities, something that suggests the signaling power of the hiring process. In other words, hiring offered an opportunity for schools to send the message that educating students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms was a priority. Schools approached hiring as a two-way exchange of information that allowed schools and candidates to judge how well they matched with each other. At another school the principal explained that she will often ask candidate teachers to role-play a situation in which a student is combative and disruptive. She is looking for teachers who are willing to diffuse these situations and bring the student back into the classroom instead of issuing demerit after demerit—leaving the root cause of the disruption unaddressed.

In most of the schools we studied, school leaders hired special educators using the same procedures as general educators. But when hiring special educators, school leaders emphasized the importance of assessing a candidate’s belief in all students’ ability to learn and their openness to feedback. Finding candidates who combined a belief in students, high expectations, and an interest in feedback and improvement may be a key to building an excellent special education program. One principal said:

If you are hired as a special education teacher here you've got to really want it because our expectations are extraordinarily high. Because these are students that need it the most and I make that very clear when I interview [candidates].

The special education team is well resourced and has the flexibility to help their colleagues when needed. In addition to hiring the right people, schools organized, deployed, and supported their special education team in ways that promoted collaboration and problem solving. Most of the schools we visited had special education teams that included resource teachers, aides, and a special education director. These teams were relatively well staffed. Across the schools, the median staffing ratio was 1 special education teacher for every 16 students with disabilities. Adding in special education aides brings the ratio down to 1:11. On average, about 20 percent of the school's teachers were special educators. One of the more unique (and generous) staffing models employed four special education teachers/case managers, four project managers, and several paraprofessionals (depending on student needs year to year) for 38 students with disabilities.

Project Managers at Northern Lights Community School

At Northern Lights, project managers—paraprofessionals who are partnered with general educators—are assigned to provide extra support to students with disabilities on projects in their advisory classroom. Many teachers describe the project managers as key to making the school model work. Having a special education-specific support in each classroom, as well as push-in and pull-out support provided by the special educators and paraprofessionals, enables the inclusion of almost all students with disabilities in mainstream advisory and seminar classes. It also allows the general educators to focus on academics while the project managers and special education teachers monitor progress and track goals.

In addition to being well resourced, schools deployed special education teams in ways that supported relationship building and collaboration. For example, some schools scheduled their special educators to “loop” year to year with the same general educators. This looping arrangement helped special and general educators build long-term collaborative working relationships. One special educator explained the benefits of staff-based looping:

We typically stay with our focus [general] teacher from year to year, which really has been helpful with us learning the curriculum, being very, very familiar with the teacher's style and curriculum. I frequently will cover [the classroom teacher's] class because I'm so familiar with her curriculum. . . It also gives the kids receiving the services, they feel very comfortable with us. Because from day one, we're just in that classroom all the time, and we're working as one of the teachers. Instead of seeing us as, 'Oh, my goodness, here comes that [special educator] to bug me and point out that I'm [not following the] IEP.' They really, I think, start to see us as part of the classroom. That's really a wonderful position to be in.

Schools also supported collaboration by scheduling common planning time for special and general educators who were co-teaching and otherwise supporting partnerships between special educators and general educators. A school in one of the CMOs in our study, for example, supports co-teaching with formal onboarding process for co-teachers. A teacher explained:

Beginning before school even started, [school administrators] had us sit down with this template, 'Talk about your strengths, your weaknesses, what you want to achieve this year, what your goal for co-teaching is'. . . So that was really helpful to start that relationship.

Once paired, co-teachers at the school have weekly co-planning time, receive joint coaching in the classroom, and use a structured protocol to debrief their teaching. The school prioritizes these co-teaching resources. A general education math teacher said the school's leaders are serious about protecting co-planning time, explaining: “[The school leaders are] like, ‘You hold that sacred.’ So we're supposed to meet, I want to say it's 45 minutes, 30 minutes a week, at least.”

In schools that did not use a co-teaching model, leaders supported collaboration with other staffing structures and investments. One school's Response to Intervention (RTI) team offers a typical example. The team is well staffed, including the school's principal, a special education director, an academic counselor, and a mental health counselor (other schools had similar high-powered teams, sometimes called "coordination of services" teams). Every week, the RTI team meets to discuss concerns about students and to coordinate and develop supports for individual students as needed. As in other schools, this teaming and meeting structure helped educators discuss and make collaborative decisions about how to best support students.

Information and intervention systems promote collaboration and problem solving. Finally, schools supported collaboration and problem solving by systematically collecting and sharing information about students with disabilities schoolwide. Some of these information systems provided quick summaries of student needs at the start of the year while others were designed to capture notes and information about students throughout the year.

Several schools produced a summary document at the start of the school year to be shared with the school's teachers that covered each student with a disability. One school, for example, publishes a "passport" at the beginning of the school year that profiles all students with IEPs. As a general educator described it, the passport "just gives a bullet point, super easy to digest, overview of what accommodations a kid needs." In addition to the passport, the special education director used a Google sheet to maintain and update more detailed data on all students throughout the year. Teachers used these data to inform their instruction. A 6th-grade humanities teacher explained:

This school does an absolutely amazing job with keeping a record. We work almost entirely off of Google Drive, so we have documents that have each kids' goals for their math goal, their [English Language Arts] goal, their [English Language Development] goal. . . We meet once a week for 30 to 45 minutes, sometimes longer, to just debrief, go over data, like, 'Oh, we have a kid with an IEP who just got a D on a writing project? Let's look at his writing. What skills does he or she need remediation on?'

The passport, database, and in-person meetings between special education and classroom teachers gave teachers support and information that they used to adjust how they supported students.

Renaissance Arts Academy in Los Angeles, a school we profile, provides another example of how schools collected and organized data to support problem solving and collaboration. RenArts built a custom attendance system that includes fields for note taking. Teachers used the system to track how students did throughout the day. As one educator explained, if he saw a note in the system about a student who was having issues with anxiety, "We may come up with a plan for [the student] to very discreetly remove themselves from a classroom, and go and cool down. We can [use the system to] track both how many times that's happening, and whether or not they're getting back into class, just from the notes. It's qualitative, and it's informally written down, but it's so much more than you would have in normal setting."

The organizational structures highlighted in this section address different aspects of the school, but all of them guide the flow and use of talent, resources, and information in ways that support collaborative relationships and problem solving.

A sound compliance process secures special education

Special education, for good reason, is governed by a set of procedures and provisions meant to ensure that students with disabilities are properly identified and assessed, and that an appropriate learning plan is designed, set in motion, and continually monitored. The required procedures and documentation—often referred to in schools as the IEP process—are legally mandated and require proper attention and investment, which most of the schools in our study had done. Typically, the director of special education or someone designated by the director took ultimate responsibility for overseeing the process by implementing communication routines, maintaining records, and providing educators with any necessary guidance and support.

Rather than describing compliance to the IEP process as a burden, schools in our study described a sound IEP process as a foundational platform from which they could pursue a wider (perhaps more innovative) range of supports with their students.

Nowhere was the importance of a compliant IEP process that leads to robust IEPs more apparent than in schools that had a prior history of noncompliance or ad hoc procedures. Four of the schools in our study acknowledged their history of noncompliance, which in one case resulted in a lawsuit. Reflecting back on this history, the school leaders and special education directors, who in most cases were brought in to clean up the process, noted that the lack of structures and systems for compliance in the school meant that teachers would often take the most cautious route to supporting students. Communication with parents was often unclear and students' learning suffered.

Though a lawsuit is never easy to endure, the principal in that school said it was ultimately good for the school because it forced them to “get their house in order.”

Policy and External Support Systems Reinforce and Sustain Schools to Serve All Students

The principles and structures we described in the Coherent Systems section are, in part, made possible by charter schools' ability to determine the instructional strategies that work best for their students, to establish their own approaches to build strong adult and student cultures, and to recruit staff and families who fully commit to the school's approach. The guiding principles and reinforcing structures we observed rely on a consistent schoolwide approach, the capacity to flex and innovate in response to student needs, and a very intentional approach to continuous improvement—both made possible in large part because of the autonomy charter schools enjoy.

But charter schools do not exist in a vacuum. Autonomy is a double-edged sword, especially when it comes to educating students with disabilities. Charter schools often do not have access to the economies of scale that large districts enjoy, limiting their capacity to provide all of the instructional expertise and services required to meet the varying needs of their students. And while autonomy is an important enabling condition, it is not enough. Other important factors include how charter schools are authorized, overseen, and held accountable regarding students with disabilities; whether public funding is adequate and aligned to student needs; and whether charter schools have access to external service providers and other supports. These factors can either foster or impede their ability to execute on effective educational practices for students with disabilities.

We discovered that it was rare to find all the ideal policy and external support conditions in any one of the schools we visited. Although none of the schools pointed to external conditions as an excuse for failing to serve students with disabilities, they did note persistent challenges. Some of these challenges are nearly universal to all public schools (e.g., inadequate funding and limited human capital pipeline), while others are unique to charter schools given their unique policy and operational contexts (e.g., unclear lines of authority and responsibility, small size, and limited established systems and structures). Consequently, charter schools often had difficulty recruiting and retaining educators who had aligned skills and beliefs. They struggled to access appropriate training and specialized services from state or local agencies. And their authorizers, though rarely a severe impediment, offered only limited expertise or motivation for improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

We did identify some examples of states or locales that seem to have policy conditions that foster development of high-quality services for students with disabilities. For instance, some authorizers in our study have worked to create technical supports and accountability measures for students with disabilities in collaboration with the charter schools they oversee. Some schools benefit from the support, resources, and expertise of regional providers. Some states have improved their funding formulas to better align with individual student needs.

For the most part, however, the schools are getting positive outcomes despite—not because of—the policy contexts in which they operate. Next we outline the most pressing challenges schools in our study face and how they dealt with them. The conclusion will suggest ways these challenges can be addressed so these schools can sustain and continue to improve their outcomes—and more schools can follow in their footsteps.

Schools Are Challenged to Find, Train, and Keep Educators Who Are Both Effective and Philosophically Aligned

Effective special education, as shown in our and others' research, is a function of great teachers. Finding, training, and keeping educators and leaders, who are effective with students with disabilities and fully committed to the principles and schoolwide strategies described in other sections of this report, [remains a challenge](#) for schools across our study. In addition to the general difficulty in attracting teachers to apply—a condition acutely felt by the rural schools in our study—schools described the difficulty of finding special education teachers who had the content knowledge necessary to be successful in co-teaching arrangements. Schools also struggled to find general education teachers who had training and experience with instructional differentiation and understood and appreciated the role of accommodations and modifications in the learning plans for students with disabilities. Several schools noted the challenge of developing novice teachers, especially in schools with high teacher turnover. One special education director said:

When I'm pushing into the general education classroom, I'm observing to make sure, are their accommodations in the right place? Are they getting the right accommodations? Do the teachers know who the kids are? Because, I would speak specifically about our charter school, teacher turnover is very high. So you are having to coach novice teachers. Significant sizes of cohorts of novice teachers year, over year, over year. So many of them come in and they don't even know what special education really is or really is about. So you're starting at level one, where it's like, 'These are your children, these are their accommodations, this is what these . . . the most used accommodations. This is what these mean, and what they look like in practice.' And you're really holding them to task. Like, when you are planning, you have to consider these children. You have to consider what their accommodations are.

These challenges only add more responsibility to the special education team's plate, as special education director further noted:

And then my teachers are so new to special education that the idea of being able to look at work and recognize where that disability is really impacting that student's learning is something I'm having to do a lot of work with them on instead of that being more of a, 'Okay, I got this, I'm responding to it,' which makes it a lot slower.

Schools adapted to these challenges in different ways. One school emphasized the recruitment of dual-certified teachers as a way to make sure both their general and special education teams had the experience and knowledge they needed in terms of content and educating students with disabilities. Other schools described encouraging general education teachers who had been successful with their students with disabilities to obtain special education certification. Another school built an internal pipeline that recruited junior or associate teachers, most of whom were general education certified, and developed them to join special education.

Lack of access to ongoing, high-quality professional development exacerbated the talent challenge. Schools reported that state-run workshops and coursework offered at the district level for general education teachers were overly focused on compliance. Special education teachers reported lack of access to rich development opportunities. In particular, professional development lacked quality programming on co-teaching and effective approaches to full inclusion.

Legal Status Determines Responsibility and Shapes Practice

State charter laws vary on the legal status they establish for charter schools. Some make charter schools autonomous LEAs (i.e., districts); others make them part of an existing LEA, and still others form a hybrid of the two (i.e., they operate as their own LEA for some aspects, such as state accountability, but are part of an LEA for other aspects, such as the provision of special education). Legal status is important because the federal law outlining the rights of students with disabilities (IDEA) assigns legal responsibility for upholding students' rights (see inset on FAPE and LRE) to LEAs.⁵ Among the schools in our study, 19 operated as their own LEA, 9 operated as part of a district LEA, and 2 operated as their own LEA but were considered to be part of a district LEA for the purpose of special education. In addition, 14 of the schools were part of a CMO. This variation in legal and CMO status revealed the tradeoffs associated with each.

Federally Defined Rights for Students with Disabilities: FAPE and LRE

Every local education agency (LEA) is required to provide a **free and appropriate education (FAPE)** to all children between the ages of 3 and 21 (Sec. 300.101).

Along with FAPE, LEAs must educate students with disabilities in the **least restrictive environment (LRE)** “to the maximum extent appropriate” alongside students without disabilities. This means that they should only be in a separate setting if the severity of the disability makes it so they will not receive educational benefit unless they are placed there (Sec. 300.114).

If schools operate as part of a district LEA, even if it is just for the purpose of providing special education services, the district retains ultimate authority—and liability—for ensuring the rights of students with disabilities. Furthermore, the charter schools gain varying degrees of access to the centralized special education department and systems of the district. These centralized systems generally provide resources for student testing, a host of related service providers, transition programming, legal counsel, and, one district we visited provided financial support for select charter schools to host specialized programs for students who require more significant supports and services.

A charter school operating as part of a district LEA has access to other district schools or programs if the IEP team determines such a placement is the Least Restrictive Environment, just as can be done in other district schools.

But operating as part of a larger district can have tradeoffs, typically in the form of some loss of autonomy. For instance, when operating as part of a district, charter schools typically must negotiate with the district to determine how funding will flow and who is responsible for specific aspects of special education service delivery. And, district personnel may participate in the IEP team's decision-making process and influence how students with more significant support needs can access charter schools. This may include limiting students' options to established specialized programs in traditional public schools. Notably, Denver has proactively encouraged charter schools to develop specialized programs for students who require more significant supports and actually places students in charter schools. In other contexts, the district, acting as the LEA, may assign teachers and specialists—such as speech and occupational therapists—to the charter schools. While this may reduce the challenges associated with having to identify specialists, the specialists assigned by the district are not always familiar with or support the school's approach, and may not perform to their school's standards of quality. And because the charter school receives staff, not a budget based on per-student funding, the school cannot necessarily use funds in innovative, cost-saving ways: often they must continually fight and play politics with other schools for more resources and services for their students.

Conversely, charter schools operating as their own LEA enjoy more autonomy but also more responsibility and financial exposure. They must provide a full continuum of educational placements and cannot rely on the district LEA to provide any specialized supports. However, the autonomy allows charter LEAs to define their own approach, including determining their curriculum, school day and calendar, and staffing. Leaders from charter LEAs in our study described the effort it took to recruit and retain staff and secure contracts with related service providers. The small

schools in our study identified the challenge of stretching dollars absent the ability to realize any economies of scale. Leaders in schools operating as LEAs also talked about the burdens of paperwork and reporting relative to their small administrative staff.

Student record transfer between traditional and charter LEAs was identified as a challenge in multiple states. In some cases, charter LEAs are not allowed to access local districts' student information and reporting systems that would provide a fluid transfer of records. This can lead to charter LEAs going months without a new student's IEP, which can hinder provision of appropriate services.

Operating as part of a CMO can help charter LEAs address some of the challenges associated with operating wholly independently of district LEAs. For instance, schools that operated as part of a CMO network reported realizing many of the same economies of scale as districts, but with more of a unified mission and shared philosophy. As with districts, the scale and centralized administration of a CMO offered the benefits of a special education system and allowed for many services, including assessment and identification, professional development, and some related services to be provided by in-house network providers.

The CMOs we visited provided centralized systems to support special education. All of the networks in our study had a dedicated central office leader overseeing the network's special education programs and were responsible for providing structure and expertise to the programs. These leaders also served as an advocate for special education in network-wide planning, though their success, we found, still hinged on the network CEO and principal's commitment to high-quality special education.

We also saw some tensions between school and CMO central offices, similar to schools that operated as part of a traditional district LEA. In one CMO, the principal had no idea how much funding they received for special education since the CMO provided all of the staff. And in several CMOs, the principal had to lobby for more resources from the central office rather than receive a proportionate share: the principals most committed to special education often ended up with the best resourced programs even if other schools had similar programmatic needs.

TABLE 1. Weighing the Advantages and Disadvantages of LEA Status

Legal Status	Advantages	Disadvantages
Part of an LEA: shared responsibility for implementation of IDEA with traditional district	Access to district resources, expertise, and economies of scale	<p>Access to district resources, expertise, and economies of scale</p> <p>Shared control over staffing</p> <p>Shared ownership, control over resources and budget decision</p> <p>District professional development can focus on compliance or not be aligned with the school's approach</p>
Independent LEA: legally responsible for requirements of IDEA	Autonomy over staff and resources can promote integrated, coherent approach	<p>Full responsibilities for FAPE and LRE</p> <p>Limited financial resources due to small size relative to traditional district</p> <p>Lack of economies of scale, wide staff expertise</p> <p>Difficulty with student record</p>

Legal Status and Geography Limit Access to Specialized Supports

The schools in our study span a wide range of governance contexts due to the nature of their state laws. This influenced the types of specialized supports they could access—supports that traditional public schools typically have ready access to. Where they fell in these different governance arrangements had important implications for the resources they could access, the resources they needed to seek elsewhere, and, ultimately, the responsibility they had for key provisions of special education law—Free and Appropriate Public Education and Least Restrictive Environment.

Nonetheless, all the schools we studied required some external expertise and support to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their schools. How they accessed the external supports differed depending on their LEA status and membership in a CMO, and those governance models involved tensions and tradeoffs. When principals or teachers reported needing more or better external support, they described the need for high-quality professional development, specialized disability expertise, and mental health/social services. Specifically, we learned that schools often wanted professional development for general education teachers on more effectively including students with disabilities in their classrooms. Schools also wanted more targeted professional development for their special education teachers on managing behavior and how to work with students with unfamiliar disabilities. Schools sought help managing paperwork burdens and requirements. They also often wished they had access to more expertise on mental health or social service supports to help address underlying issues their students faced.

States, typically using federal funds, often operate intermediate entities to provide LEAs with specialized supports. For example, schools in Pennsylvania, Texas, and California were supported by regional service providers. Intermediate Units in Pennsylvania, Educational Services Centers in Texas, and SELPAs (special education local plan areas) in California employ a wide range of service providers, as well as staff who can help schools to navigate the financial and regulatory requirements of special education programs. Schools typically pay for these agency services, but it allows small independent schools to leverage the economies of scale of a larger system.

Teachers who shared experiences attending workshops from state, county, or other government intermediary agencies generally found the trainings to be focused on compliance, not on high-quality instructional strategies or their particular approach (e.g., arts or STEM). When they were focused on instruction, they typically were open only to special education teachers, leaving general education teachers without guidance.

External supports (e.g., collaboratives, district partnerships, and intermediate agencies) were identified as potentially critical but hard to sustain. Some schools we studied tried to address the need themselves by forming collaboratives with other charter schools or by partnering with their local district. But these efforts were difficult to sustain and often suffered from lack of follow through or commitment from all of the parties. In rural areas, the need was particularly acute given the small size and small number of schools.

Schools in our study typically contracted for a host of specialized services, including psychologists to assess and identify students for special education, related services, mental health services, social workers, transition programs, and professional development for both special and general education teachers. However, access to such providers was expensive and dependent on local availability. One rural school was experimenting with online speech therapy services.

Charter Authorizers Can Introduce Critical Accountability But Can Also Undermine a Focus on Outcomes and Innovation

Charter school authorizers grant, oversee, and hold charter schools accountable for performance metrics outlined in their charter contract. Most of the teachers, principals, and CMO leaders we interviewed told us their authorizer had little to do with the quality of special education services they offered. In some cases we saw evidence that authorizers had sent critical signals to schools that they would be held accountable for compliance requirements—an important element of special education. But in most cases the authorizer's role was limited to monitoring and accountability as

opposed to capacity building. Some schools reported that their authorizer placed so much emphasis on compliance (i.e., largely input measures) that schools found it difficult to stay focused on improving outcomes. Many of these requirements centered on the credentials of special education personnel and tracking how they allocated their time. In a more extreme case of compliance-driven schools, one school in our study that had a somewhat hostile relationship with its authorizer reported that they could not change the list of offered courses because it was specified in the charter and would be considered in violation of their charter, jeopardizing their standing. As such, they were unable to explore different scheduling or curriculum models in the school.

We did find some evidence of authorizers trying to be less rigid and more responsive to schools' concerns. One authorizer in our study worked with a committee of school leaders to develop a range of school-level performance measures for students across a range of needs. One school leader noted that the authorizer engaged the charter schools in the process and changed one measure when she and other leaders noted the conflicting incentives the measure would create.

One authorizer, also bucking the focus on compliance, built resources to support the schools they chartered. This authorizer created a charter school office charged with managing support and oversight to charter schools that operate as part of the district. The office was identified by schools as being supportive and explicitly encouraging innovation by offering grants to charter schools interested in implementing new initiatives that would benefit students with disabilities. While some schools lamented the lack of autonomy in this instance, others felt the tradeoff was worthwhile given the support and safety net provided by the district authorizers.

Charter school authorizers generally play a central role in shaping the policy context in which charter schools operate. Whether they approach their responsibilities as limited to authorization and renewal or more granularly influence special education programmatic decisions, they influence how charter schools serve students with disabilities.

Funding—Both Structure and Adequacy—Can Impede Schools' Ability to Provide Special Education and Related Services

The overall funding levels at the schools in our study varied considerably, from just over \$7,000 to more than \$25,000 per pupil, with median spending of about \$12,000. Nevertheless, schools that prioritized special education found a way to provide the basics for students with disabilities. We did observe many challenges associated with both the quantity of funding and the manner in which states and districts distribute funds.

The schools we studied reflected the broader national narrative. State funding formulas, especially those that cap special education funding at a certain percentage of students, tend to work best for large districts that can realize some economies of scale or supplement special education services with basic education funds. But state funding rarely works well for small districts and charter schools, creating very difficult mismatches between student needs and funding resources. One of the most striking examples of this mismatch is in Washington state. (CRPE recently conducted case studies in five Washington schools for a separate but related study.) Washington caps special education funding at 13 percent of total student population. Washington charter schools typically [serve more than 15 percent](#) even though the formula does not provide additional revenue reflecting the actual students enrolled or services outlined in an individual student's IEP. Consequently, many schools in Washington are struggling to make up the difference, relying on philanthropic dollars.

Notably, [New Orleans is working to address these challenges](#) with a multipronged effort to increase dollars flowing into programs—such as those offered by Collegiate Academies—for students who require more significant support while avoiding creating incentives to over-identify. The [formula considers](#) both disability diagnosis and quantity of hours of services provided rather than the level of restriction of the placement. To guard against over-identification, Louisiana watches for and audits unusual jumps in IEP numbers. The state also created a local extraordinary-needs fund for New Orleans public schools—all of which operate as charter schools—and local investment in grants supports new specialized programming in the schools so that a broad spectrum of needs can be met across the city.

A unique challenge raised by charter schools that operate as part of their local LEA is the level of discretion exercised by the district in how it distributes funds. While not a universal challenge, some schools expressed frustration with the lack of transparency provided by district LEAs in determining the funding for staff and specialists in lieu of funding allocated to charter schools.

The other significant and related financial challenge charter schools identified is managing the costs associated with providing highly specialized services to students who require significant supports, such as those students with significant medical needs. In particular, small charter schools can struggle to allocate adequate funding or access requisite specialized staff to fulfill their responsibilities to provide FAPE. And their charter status precludes their ability to simply increase their tax revenue, a common strategy for traditional districts that need to increase revenue given rising expenses. State-funded risk pools and emergency funds can mitigate funding risks, but are perennially underfunded. Even when charter schools are able to access the funds, the [dollars fall short](#) of the need.

Implications: What These Findings Imply for Future Policy, Practice, and Research

The very good news from our study is that the common strategies identified as effective across the 30 schools we studied are, for the most part, things that any school can do with the existing staff and resources they have. There is an implied set of “first-order” steps for school leaders and CMOs:

- Ensure general education instruction—the foundation of special education—is of high quality and that all teachers can manage diverse learners (e.g., classroom management, differentiation, grouping).
- Make students with disabilities a priority, and make their progress an indicator of the school’s success.
- Accept that serving students with disabilities is shared work, not the sole responsibility of special education teachers and related services personnel.
- Attend to staff stability and morale.
- Build trust with families and seek a fundamental exchange of respect.
- Nail down core IEP processes and basic knowledge of accommodations. Doing so will free educators to deal with real problem solving.
- Know that a personalized approach matters, but is hard to pull off. Teachers will need time for collaboration, reflection, and learning.

Still, too many schools—both charter and district—cannot get to, or go much beyond, these first-order steps to leverage their autonomy and flexibility to catalyze innovation. Lack of staff resources and alignment among staff, ineffective leadership, or other constraints are significant barriers. Legislators, charter authorizers, funders, mayors, and others in leadership positions all have a critical role to play here.

New supports and resources are needed to help schools adopt and sustain these strategies, including time for staff to work together across classrooms. And charter authorizers, school boards, and state and federal agencies must play closer attention to assessing schools’ capacities along these lines. Whether or not schools are using evidence-based practices to educate students with disabilities should be assessed and reported on in charter school applications, renewals, and performance audits.

But we also saw that even the schools we studied have work to do to fully tap every student's potential and to fully prepare students with disabilities for rich, independent academic and social lives. With typical proficiency rates around 20 percent and graduation rates short of 70 percent, it is clear that too many students with disabilities still lag far behind their peers. Furthermore, contributing to but distinct from these academic gaps, too many students are still not getting the emotional and social supports they need. And too many are graduating ill-prepared to succeed after high school.

Addressing these gaps will take a tremendous amount of time and resources and a wholesale reimagination of the classroom environment. For instance, can we conceive schools committed to universal access by design that provide a highly personalized experience for every student, including those with the most complex learning needs? With the right resources and vision, we believe this is possible and even necessary. How else can U.S. education ever hope to erase the shameful achievement gaps between students who learn differently?

We must evolve from a primary focus on compliance and access to include focus on outcomes and potential. This may be a difficult evolution for those advocates who have worked tirelessly to guarantee access to accommodations and least restrictive environments, but we must identify a path forward that ensures we consolidate the civil rights gains these advocates have won, and simultaneously keep moving forward to close the persistent achievement gap.

It's time to completely revamp our definitions of, and strategies for, successful post-high school transition planning. No schools in our study, and few that we know of elsewhere, are doing a great job of preparing children with disabilities for career and life.

Parents and students must have more decision-making power to shape their own learning pathways. Educators, advocates, and policymakers must better define success and then figure out how to measure if a school is meeting that mark. Schools and teachers who don't use evidence-based strategies and attempt new ways of reaching students should also be held accountable. But first, we must design teacher pipelines and development pathways that keep educators abreast of the best new practices, so they have a hope of employing them in the classroom.

The findings from our study show how school autonomy and coherency give charter schools an inherent opportunity to establish practices that avoid stigmatizing or unnecessarily separating students with disabilities. And the findings show how data and individualized solutions in special education can lead to more effective instruction for all students. This should cause us to look harder for ways to create those conditions in district schools. But the findings also show that all public schools—charter and district—have work ahead to realize the potential of every student with unique learning needs and unique abilities.

Realizing that goal will take much time, money, and political will. We at CRPE and NCSECS will continue to posit new ideas and research promising steps toward this end.

Appendix A. Data and Methods

This exploratory study set out to identify charter schools with a record of success in educating students with disabilities and to learn from those schools. How did they approach instruction? Structure their schools? If they were part of a CMO, what support did they get from it? How were they impacted by policy and conditions outside the school (e.g., authorizer policy, resources and resource allocation, external support providers)? In this section we describe how we selected the sample and our approach to data collection and analysis.

Study Sample Overview

The study included a purposive sample of 30 charter schools across 20 cities and 14 states. We selected 20 schools based on their outcomes for students with disabilities. We selected the remaining 10 schools at the request of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation because they were working with the Foundation to improve how they educate students with disabilities (two schools from five CMOs). This group of 10 schools was not selected based on their outcomes for students with disabilities. These schools, along with a handful of false-positives from the group of 20 schools selected for their outcomes provide useful contrasts to the higher-performing schools.

Like samples in other studies of “effective schools” or “outliers,” the sample in this study does not provide a generalizable picture of special education in the charter sector. Instead, the purposeful sample allowed us to explore patterns in schools that appeared to be having some success with students with disabilities. The results suggest hypotheses about what might be driving their success rather than strong claims about what works (or doesn’t).

Identifying Schools with a Record of Success

Identifying charter schools that are doing well with students with disabilities presents several challenges. Performance and programmatic information is hard to come by. Performance data on students with disabilities is often unavailable or nonexistent in state data systems; information about school programs is even more difficult to obtain and is not standardized. Our approach combined the use of public data when possible and expert professional judgments. More specifically, we identified the study sample using two strategies:

Strategy 1: Selection based on student outcomes using public data

- **Step 1: Identifying candidates for inclusion.** To identify candidate charter schools for inclusion we relied on data from the EDFacts 2015 and the 2015 Civil Rights Data Collection on all public schools in the United States (at the time, 2015 was the most recent available data from both sources). We used these data to identify charter schools with relatively better outcomes for students with disabilities than other public schools, including district schools. We examined student outcomes in four areas: English language arts test performance of students with disabilities, advanced math course-taking by students with disabilities, reports of bullying from students with disabilities (reverse), reports of out-of-school suspension of students with special needs (reverse). Data on test performance came from EDFacts for the school years 2013–2014 and 2014–2015. Data on course-taking, bullying, and suspension and expulsion came from the Office for Civil Rights Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). We conducted a residual analysis of the schools’ 2014–2015 outcomes controlling for the school’s student composition (race, English language learner status, and special education status) and included state fixed effects for analyses of state assessment. We only included schools in our analysis that had a special education population between 8 percent and 50 percent, and schools with a free or reduced-price lunch population of at least 50 percent. Our funder requested these limits to ensure that schools had a representative special education population and served an economically disadvantaged community. We identified the top 10 middle schools and 10 high schools based on their ranking of out-performance given their student population in each of the outlier domains. This process yielded 80 candidate charter schools, though some schools were duplicated in the list due to ranking in the top 10 in more than one domain area.

- **Step 2: Verifying the candidates.** Once we had generated a list of candidate charter schools, we conducted additional analyses to further refine the list. We used additional years of performance data to identify charter schools that had a track record of positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Examining test scores from 2013 to 2015 we refined our list to include 30 charter schools that consistently posted three years of relatively high results for students with disabilities. We weighted schools higher that demonstrated results on test score achievement due to some concerns with zero values for most schools on our list in the domains from the CRDC.

Strategy 2: Selection based on nominations from experts in the field

- **Step 1: Identifying candidates for inclusion:** To identify additional candidate charter schools for inclusion we asked 143 charter school and special education advocates and leaders for nominations. This list of leaders was culled from NCSECS's and CRPE's connections in the field of special education and charter schools. We asked them to use their professional judgement to nominate charter schools that were successful with students with disabilities and/or had interesting programs for students with disabilities. We received 35 nominations from the group.
- **Step 2: Verifying the candidates:** Once we had a list of nominated schools, we verified the school's programs through website reviews and/or direct phone calls to the schools. We confirmed the school's performance record using the data from ED Facts and CRDC that we used in our first strategy. These procedures reduced the list of nominations to 11 schools (for example, we were unable to verify a school's program).
- **Step 3: Confirming the nomination for inclusion or exclusion:** Finally, as in the first strategy, we only included schools that had a special education population between 8 percent and 50 percent of the total enrollment.

Schools were recruited from our list based on their rank within the domain in which they were identified (i.e., schools ranked number one for test scores, discipline, advanced math course taking, and bullying were called before those ranked second). Researchers attempted to speak to school principals via telephone, otherwise voicemail or e-mail messages were left to explain the project. School were offered \$1,500 to compensate for the time and effort associated with their school participating in the project. In addition, schools were invited to be part of a network of all the schools participating in the project, which included two all-expenses paid professional development and networking events in Denver, CO and Seattle, WA. The research team continued to recruit schools in rank order until 30 schools agreed to participate in the project.

Data Collection

Beginning in early October 2018 and continuing through May 2019, pairs of researchers from CRPE and NCSECS visited each of the 30 sampled schools. During two-day visits the team conducted six to nine semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, and two parent focus groups to learn more about each school and its approach to serving students with disabilities:

- School administrators. These interviews typically included principals and directors of special education. Occasionally we interviewed people in other leadership positions, such as a director of transition, members of the school's governing board.
- Teachers, including special and general education teachers.
- Parents of students with disabilities enrolled in the school.
- Network administrators where applicable. These interviews typically involved the network's director of special education but occasionally included the network CEO or other members of the leadership team.

Table 2 shows the number of interviews we conducted by role.

TABLE 2. Interview Count by Role Type

Role	Number of interviews
Administrators	73
Teachers	267
Parents	48
Network administrators	10
Total	388

Researchers also observed up to six classrooms per school during school visits. In every school these observations included inclusion classrooms. On occasion we also observed pull-out settings. Where possible, we observed the classrooms for the teachers we interviewed, allowing us to discuss the context of classrooms with those teachers. We conducted 166 classroom observations.

In addition to the school visits, we reviewed documents and conducted supplementary interviews to better understand each school's policy context. In some cases, we interviewed external support providers, representatives from the authorizer, or other policy leaders familiar with the policy context surrounding the school. We conducted five of these supplemental interviews.

Data Analysis

The above activities produced a large volume of qualitative data. We relied on the following analysis procedures. Field teams completed summary memos during their school visits that included open-ended memoing and structured questions about the school's special education program, organizational structures, classroom instruction and curriculum, culture and discipline, staffing/scheduling, hiring and training, parents and community, authorizer and central office (for CMOs), and policy environment. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. After the field visits, researchers reviewed the transcripts and revised their summary memos to include direct quotes. The structured memos facilitated cross-site comparisons by the research team. In addition, the research teams met throughout the project to compare findings across schools and discuss emerging themes and divergent cases. The research team also wrote analytical memos and cross-case matrices to examine emerging themes across all of the sites. The team used a combination of memoing, discussion, and cross-case comparisons (matrices) to produce the main ideas in the report.

Endnotes

1. To ensure that our study was not limited to only schools serving advantaged students and included schools that had performed well with less advantaged students, we chose to control for the student body composition in our analysis.
2. By promising, we mean schools in which students with disabilities showed academic success, parents expressed confidence in the school, and teachers felt supported and successful working with their students with disabilities.
3. Neoboards, also called Alpha Smarts, are small word processing devices that students may use if they have difficulty with writing.
4. For example, see Huriya Jabbar, “Recruiting “Talent”: School Choice and Teacher Hiring in New Orleans,” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (February 2018): 115–151.
5. Jay P. Heubert, “Schools Without Rules? Charter Schools, Federal Disability Law, and the Paradoxes of Deregulation,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 32 (1997): 301–353.